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# Thomas Merton as Poet of the Liturgy

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THOMAS MERTON AS POET OF THE LITURGY

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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## LIFE

Sister Mary Paul Reilly, O.S.B., was born in Chicago, Illinois, July 10, 1920.

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The author has written a book entitled What Must I Do, Milwaukee, Bruce, 1950.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Thomas Merton can, perhaps, best be described as a phenomenon; yet he is not thereby excluded from serious consideration, as the high praise of many competent critics evidences. In Merton one confronts the paradox of a Trappist monk who makes best-seller lists. His autobiography, The Seven Storey Mountain, 1948, was an outstanding publishing success, and all of his subsequent ventures into authorship have been well received popularly, though he has incurred charges of superficiality from some. A mere listing of his literary output from 1946 until 1953 will give one basis for this accusation. Following is such a list with a brief, descriptive annotation for each title. The Seven Storey Mountain, on which his reputation is largely based, is noted above.

Exile Ends in Glory, Milwaukee, Bruce, 1948. This is the life of a Trappistine nun, Mother M. Berchmans, whose spirituality is comparable to that of the Little Flower.

Seeds of Contemplation, N. Y., New Directions, 1949. A spiritual journal of random jottings and reflections on the spiritual life with emphasis on mental prayer in particular.

Waters of Siloe, N. Y., Harcourt, 1949, in which Merton traces the history of the Cistercians, profiling the greatest of his Trappist forbears.

What are These Wounds? Milwaukee, Bruce, 1950. The life of Saint Lutgarde, mystic.

Ascent to Truth, N. Y., Harcourt, 1951, which purports "to define the nature of the contemplative experience, to show something of the necessary interior ascesis which leads up to it, and to give a brief sketch of mature contemplation."

Sign of Jonas, N. Y., Harcourt, 1953, is a monastic diary covering the years 1946-1952. It differs from Seeds of Contemplation, which contains only spiritual reflections, in that it includes day-by-day experiences and Merton's reactions to them.

A Man in the Divided Sea, N. Y., New Directions, 1946, which contains his earlier Thirty Poems.

Figures for an Apocalypse, N. Y., New Directions, 1947. All of the poems in this volume were written during Merton's life as a Trappist.

Tears of the Blind Lions, N. Y., New Directions, 1949, containing seventeen of his latest poems.

In addition, Commonweal has published two poems: "Early Mass," April 18, 1952, and "Christmas, 1951," December 26, 1952.

Publication is being delayed on a volume of poems on the psalms: Bread in the Wilderness, which was promised for March, 1953, by New Directions Press. It is, however, completed, and awaiting release.

Even considering that two of these books are contemplations of day-to-day jottings, and that some of the poems were written before Merton's entrance into Gethsemane, this is a staggering production for a period of

only five years. Merton recognizes the defects caused by this rapid writing more lucidly than any of his critics and enumerates them in The Sign of Jonas. The reception accorded his writings, however—and his appeal is to the educated, if he sometimes irritates the scholarly—seems to indicate that he deserves his audience.

This thesis is concerned only with Merton as a poet. It seeks to demonstrate that the liturgical life, participation in the recurring feasts of the Church's year and in her official ceremonial of Masses and Offices, has been the chief source of the poet's inspiration and a positive factor in the development of his art.

Disconcertingly, Sign of Jonas records what appears to be a final abjuration of any attempt to become a poet:

I decided to stop trying to be a poet any more. I did this first of all because I realized that I had never really been a good poet anyway, and it seemed to me that by continuing to write poetry I would only be imposing an illusion on the people who thought my poetry was good. In so doing, I would run the risk of coming to believe, myself, that it was good. What I was trying to do was, I think, all right. It was a movement toward integrity. If I could not write well, I would stop wasting words, time, paper, and get rid of this useless interference in my life of prayer. Since that day, in order to relax the element of pride that may have insinuated itself in this resolve, I have only written verse where I thought charity demanded or permitted it—for instance some lines for Saint Agnes, which occur later in this book, and which are simply an expression of personal devotion to her. I have written two other poems besides, both of them on occasions which called for some expression of personal affection and gratitude. To write thus is not, according to my vocabulary, an attempt to "be a poet."<sup>1</sup>

This passage occurs in the explanatory section preceding "Major

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1 Thomas Merton, The Sign of Jonas, N. Y., 1953, 127-128.

Orders," Part Three of The Sign of Jonas, which takes the journal through 1949. Merton's description of the taking of the resolution on the occasion of his ordination to the diaconate March 19, 1949, follows:

First, kneeling in the sanctuary after ordination and during the Canon of the Mass, I realized clearly that I ought to stop trying to be a poet and be definite about it, too. I went to Reverend Father afterwards and he said, all right. And I have recovered a great deal of interior liberty by that one thing. In the afternoon I tore up all the rough notes for a poem. They had been lying around for a few days.<sup>2</sup>

How, then, explain the publication of two poems in 1952, by Commonweal, or the forthcoming volume on the psalms? It may be necessary to await another installment of the journal to explain this apparent inconsistency. At any rate, there have been published to date, a total of 133 poems. On the strength of these, Merton has been called by Robert Lowell: "possibly the most consequential poet to write in English since the death of Francis Thompson,"<sup>3</sup> and by Francis Sweeney, S.J., reviewing in America: "The best religious poet of the forties, or at least a peer among three."<sup>4</sup> Ann Fremantle, reviewer for Commonweal writes: "With Robert Lowell and Thomas Merton, two poets have arisen in the forties, who should be as important for their century as Eliot and the later Yeats were in the twenties, Auden and Spender for the thirties."<sup>5</sup> John Frederick Nims, too, compares Merton with Thompson,

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Lowell, "The Verses of Thomas Merton," Commonweal, XLII, July 22, 1945, 240.

<sup>4</sup> Francis Sweeney, "The Tears of the Blind Lions," America 83, April 8, 1950, 22.

<sup>5</sup> Ann Fremantle, "More Books of the Week," Commonweal, XLV, December 27, 1946, 283-284.



though he terms the latter, even: "no giant among English poets."<sup>6</sup>

Of the 133 poems Merton has written, well over eighty have their inspiration in the liturgy, the official prayer of the Church. It is the problem of this thesis to justify this statement by analyzing the subject and content of Merton's poems and grouping them under the various phases of the liturgy that they celebrate. Of all the reviews that this writer has examined, only that of Sister Julie, O.P., emphasizes that Merton is predominately nourished and inspired by the liturgy.<sup>7</sup> It is always Merton's call to contemplation that is noted as his theme, yet the title "poet of the liturgy," is equally fitting, since participation in the Church's official worship has been, by his own admission, the principal formative influence in his spiritual development, as well as the inspiration of a large percentage of his best poetry. Nor is this merely a question of terminology; prayer comes before contemplation, and Merton's prayer is that of the ecclesia orans. This is the well-spring of his contemplation, the overflowing source from which he invites his contemporaries to drink.

As a poet Thomas Merton is an illustration of the esthetic consequences of full liturgical participation for Christian artists. Here is an inexhaustible treasury of themes, a school of beauty and of refined taste. The classicism of the liturgy, its preoccupation with eternal values, inspires art forms that are virile, devoid of sentimentality, and rooted in

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<sup>6</sup> John Frederick Nims, "A Poet of Genuine Talent," Saturday Review of Literature, XXIX, October 26, 1946, 36.

<sup>7</sup> Sister Julie, "New Directions Presents a Catholic Poet," America, 73, July 21, 1945, 316-318.

reality.

In this introductory chapter some evidences of the current interest in Thomas Merton as a poet have been presented, and his titles to date have been listed and described. It remains to give a brief survey of the method to be followed in subsequent chapters.

Chapter Two enumerates the liturgical influences in the poet's life and his own estimate of his artistic indebtedness to them.

The third chapter divides the poems according to subject matter, describing how each is the fruit of some liturgical experience or reflection, and showing how Merton has assimilated these and re-created his response in verse form.

Chapter Four uses for a basis Von Hildebrand's work, Liturgy and Personality. Citing characteristics that this author describes as results of the formative influence of the liturgy, it tests the work of the Trappist poet for evidence of these qualities.

In the final chapter, an attempt is made at a comprehensive evaluation of Thomas Merton as a liturgical poet, and some recent criticism on his significance in contemporary letters is evaluated.

To date, to the knowledge of this investigator, there have been two theses published on Merton, both at the Master's level: "An Analysis of Imagery in Selected Poems," by Sister Rosemarie Julie Gavin, S.N.D. de Namur, Catholic University of America, and "A Study of the Style and Content of the Poems of Thomas Merton," by Paul E. Brewer, S.J., Loyola, 1949, but in neither of these has the particular aspect with which this investigation is concerned, been treated.

## CHAPTER II

### LITURGICAL INFLUENCES IN THE LIFE OF THOMAS MERTON

The sound of the Marian anthem concluding Matins dies in the abbey church. A young monk kneels in prayer, his spirit steeped in the day's mystery. He opens, now, the "secret eye of faith," and "the weak walls of the world fall, and heaven in floods comes pouring in."<sup>8</sup>

Thomas Merton may be likened to a modern prophet, a twentieth century John the Baptist asking of the men of his generation: "When shall we have to eat the things that we have barely tasted?" And on behalf of his hungry brothers he calls upon the "Bridegroom's friend" to "Clean us and lead us in the new night with the power of Elias. And find us out the summits of the love and prayer that Wisdom wants of us."<sup>9</sup>

Father Louis Merton, O.C.S.O., was born of artist parents in southern France in the year 1915. His mother died when he was five, and his father, ten years later. The boy was educated in France, England and Italy, and after a final year at Cambridge, matriculated to Columbia University in the United States. Here his readings in St. Thomas Aquinas and Maritain, and his poetic interest in Crashaw and Gerard Manley Hopkins,

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Merton, "After the Night Office - Gethsemane Abbey," Figures for an Apocalypse, N. Y., 1948, 78.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., "St. John's Night," 60.

among others, led eventually to his conversion. He was baptized on November 16, 1938. There followed for him a period of adjustment during which he experienced a dichotomy between the demands of the divine life and the habits of his carefree student days. In 1940, he obtained a position teaching English literature at St. Bonaventure's College in Olean, New York. There he began the practice of regular spiritual exercises while he considered his choice of vocation. There, too, he expressed his new-found peace by writing poetry. Finally, a retreat at Gethsemane, Kentucky, inspired an interest in the Trappists, and the following year, in Lent, 1942, he entered the Cistercian monastery there.

It is the purpose of this investigation to analyze that portion of Thomas Merton's poetic work which is liturgical in either subject matter or inspiration. He is most noted for his clarion call to contemplation in his poetry and prose writings. But what has conditioned him as a man of prayer who is also an artist? What is the well-spring from which he has drawn the Waters of Siloe in such refreshing abundance? He makes no secret of his source. In an essay which is an apology for the place of poetry in the life of a contemplative religious he has this to say:

Christ is our inspiration, and Christ is at the center of the contemplative life. Therefore, it would seem fairly evident that the one thing that will most contribute to the perfection of Catholic literature in general and poetry in particular will be for our readers and poets to start leading lives of active contemplation. In other words, to lead the full Christian life insofar as they can in their state. This means . . . solid integration of one's work and religion and family life and recreation in one, vital, harmonious unity with Christ as its center. The liturgical life is the most obvious example.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Thomas Merton, "Poetry and the Contemplative Life," Figures for an Apocalypse, N. Y., 1947, 100.

He affirms, also, that "the liturgy is . . . a school of literary taste and a mine of marvelous subjects . . .,"<sup>11</sup> and points out that "the liturgy itself contains the greatest literature, not only from Scripture, but from the genius of the Patristic and Middle Ages."<sup>12</sup>

He describes in Seven Storey Mountain how he was led by the Holy Spirit to the inexhaustible springs of the Church's prayer. Before taking his position at St. Bonaventure's, he had been advised to write to the Franciscan provincial to tell him that he had reconsidered his application to the novitiate; and from the misery and blackness he experienced at this denial of his desire for the priesthood, he emerged with a dogged determination to try to live in the world as if he were a monk in a monastery. The first step in this direction was the purchase of a set of breviaries. Here is his description of what the Church's prayer meant to him, as he grew in appreciation of its richness:

I did not even reflect how the Breviary, the canonical office, was the most powerful and effective prayer I could possibly have chosen, since it is prayer of the whole Church and concentrates in itself all the power of the Church's impetration, centered around the infinitely mighty sacrifice of the Mass, the jewel of which the rest of the liturgy is the setting: the soul which is the life of the whole liturgy and of all the sacramentals. All this was beyond me, although I grasped it at least obscurely. All I knew was that I needed to say the Breviary and say it every day.<sup>13</sup>

From the consciousness of this need, Merton recounts how he progressed to a realization of the strength and peace which grew in him through the enlight-

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11 Ibid., 98.

12 Ibid., 97.

13 Thomas Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, N.Y., 1948, 301.

ened use of the prayer of Christ. But a poet was praying, and his response was aesthetic as well as spiritual, as he further describes:

I, drawn into . . . that deep, vast universal movement of vitalizing prayer, which is Christ praying in man to His Father, could not help but begin at last to live and to know that I was alive. And my heart could not help but cry out within me: 'I will sing to the Lord as long as I live: I will sing praise to my God while I have my being. Let my speech be acceptable to Him: but I will take delight in the Lord.'<sup>14</sup>

The poetry of A Man in the Divided Sea, Figures for an Apocalypse, and The Tears of the Blind Lions is a prolonged echo of that ever-deepening delight.

The liturgy has not been for Thomas Merton merely a treasure house of rich and ever-varied themes for poetic expression; it is a secondary aim of this investigation to show that it has formed him as a Christian artist. Merton's verses were a spontaneous effusion of his new-found life in Christ: "Meanwhile, suddenly, one day, toward the beginning of Lent, I began to write poems."<sup>15</sup> This was after an initial period of confusion when he had been attempting to go on living as he had always done, careful only to avoid mortal sin. He had determined, now, to live a life of spiritual perfection, had begun the practice of asceticism and solitude, was nourishing his spirit daily with Mass and Communion and the recitation of the Divine Office, and it was not long before he began to compose his poems.

This spiritual and artistic development is clearly noticeable in the quality of his writing. John Frederick Nims, literary critic for the Saturday Review of Literature, has pointed out that his first poetry is of

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 303.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 310.

two well-defined sorts: the more secular early work which "paints a pastel, dreamy world, thin, bloodless . . . with only the images alive, pinwheeling off in all directions . . . . No human beings appear. It is the world of Ariadne, Calypso . . . . Secondly, there is the poetry of his religious vocation presenting a smoothness, a conviction and a serenity astonishing in our disordered world . . ."<sup>16</sup> Another critic has also noted this development terming the earlier work:

perfunctory verse . . . verse written to a synthetic background in which Merton is not fully at home . . . . It is not until Merton has entered fully into Catholicism as a direct spiritual experience, until, in fact, he has felt its tradition in terms of his own mystic necessities, that his poetry changes in character. Principally he has gained in passion, in spiritual insight, and in his lyric presentation. His poems now are at one with his interest.<sup>17</sup>

Of the 133 poems the young Trappist has published, eighty-six are inspired by the liturgy, or are the record of his personal contemplation on liturgical themes. It would seem, then, that participation in the official prayer of the Church has effected Merton's esthetic development as well as his spiritual deepening. Why this is so is indicated in the observation of Dom Ildefons Herwegen:

The liturgy is . . . the life-breath of the Church, the very spirit and life of Christ Who is the prototype of the entire cosmos of creation. Hence it must somehow reflect the splendor of the Eternal Word; it must contain the element of beauty.<sup>18</sup>

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16 John Frederick Nims, "A Poet of Genuine Talent," Saturday Review of Literature, XXIX, October 26, 1946, 36.

17 John Nerber, "A Trappist Canticle," Poetry, LXIX, December, 1946, 165-168.

18 Dom Ildefons Herwegen, The Art-Principle of the Liturgy, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1931. 8-9.

By these observations it is not meant that the liturgy will of necessity make a poet of anyone who drinks from its fountains of living water, but let anyone possessed of the poetic gift come into regular contact with the living word of Scripture, let him, above all, steep his spirit in the mysteries of Christ, and he will look for words to communicate his experience, to lead others to the source of his quiet joy. Bremond, moreover, assures us that "Poetic experience is an experience of this mystical order."<sup>19</sup> Hence the poetic faculty and the contemplative gift, both nourished by contact with the ceremonies and texts of the liturgy, will reciprocally strengthen one another. Certainly, the poet and the contemplative have much in common. When a lover of art or music loses himself, penetrated by an unreasoning delight in the esthetic excellence of his object, he is experiencing a natural contemplation: the same psychological mechanism that is active in the mystical states of prayer moves him. The poet must have this power of penetrating to the reality of things, as well as the ability to express what he has contemplated. According to Raissa Maritain, he

has plunged into the river of the spirit which flows beneath all our accustomed activity; he has felt the contact of unformulated and unformulable reality in this rare and fecund self-communion, which must somehow be merited, and from which he emerges quickened in his faculties and rich in gifts.<sup>20</sup>

This is said of any true poet, whatever the source of his inspiration; how much more may this be posited of one who, like Marton, considers as "the one

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19 Henri Bremond, Prayer and Poetry, London, 1927, 82.

20 Raissa Maritain, "Poetry as Spiritual Experience," Return to Poetry, N.Y., 1947, 60.



subject matter that is truly worthy of a Christian poet: God as He is seen by faith in revelation, or in the intimate experience of a soul illumined by the gifts of the Holy Ghost."<sup>21</sup> A contemplative who is also a poet, after he has contacted the Source of all reality in wordless prayer, comes back to himself "rich with gifts." Thereupon he uses his natural endowments and training to communicate his experience. Merton's early religious scruples on the subject of the "fatal handicap" of the esthetic instinct to the life of prayer have caused much worried speculation and debate among Catholic poets and critics. The discussion does not fall within the scope of this thesis, and, in view of the later poetic output of the author, the problem would appear to be solved to his satisfaction. Suffice it to say that the true contemplative would find it utterly impossible, while engaged in contemplation, to "start working and producing and studying the 'creative' possibilities of this experience,"<sup>22</sup> as the novice Trappist feared. But in the words of Bremond he can "in the brilliant twilight, in the halo of mystical experience," seize his divine object "in another fashion, although he no longer possesses it."<sup>23</sup>

In any analysis of formative factors the distinctive spirit of Thomas Merton's religious family must be considered. As a Cistercian he

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<sup>21</sup> Merton, "Poetry and Contemplation," Figures for an Apocalypse, N.Y., 1947, 97.

<sup>22</sup> Merton, "Poetry and the Contemplative Life," Figures for an Apocalypse, N.Y., 1947, 108.

<sup>23</sup> Bremond, Prayer and Poetry, London, 1927, 153, 150.

follows the Rule of St. Benedict and is, therefore, enrolled in the "School of the Lord's service" which that great monastic lawgiver founded. To the latter, the Divine Office, centered about the Holy Sacrifice, was the "Opus Dei," to which nothing could be preferred. Through participation in the liturgical worship of the Church and vital contact with the mysteries of Christ as they are re-presented in the recurring feasts, he envisaged a monastic character formation in which the theocentric qualities of reverence, silence, obedience to Christ's representative, supernatural solidarity with the brethren and devotion to God's praise were goals of virtue toward which to tend.

In Waters of Siloe Merton describes the interpenetration of the liturgy in twelfth century liturgical life, which he considers the "golden age" of his order's history and the model for Trappist existence:

The liturgy elevated and transformed every department of the monk's existence, penetrated to every recess of the monastery, and incorporated all the monk's activities into a vital and organic whole that was charged with spiritual significance . . . all nature was elevated and made sacred by the liturgy, which gathered up all the monk's acts and all his experience, ordering and offering everything to God.<sup>24</sup>

At this period of liturgical development, the temporal cycle dominated the Church year; the saints' feasts were sparse on the calendar. As a result of this fact, the admirable confluence of the liturgical cycles with nature's seasons was the more apparent.

when December came around, the very fields and bare woods began to sing the Conditor alme siderum and the great responsories of the night offices. In the snows of January the triumphant antiphons of Christmas

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<sup>24</sup> Thomas Merton, Waters of Siloe, N.Y., 1949, 296.

or the mysteriously beautiful responsories of the Epiphany followed the monk to the bare forest. Later, the office Domine ne in ira began to echo through his mind and prepare him for the austere and somber cycle of offices that would go from Septuagesima to Passion Sunday and Holy Week in an ever-increasing seriousness and dramatic power until the final anguished katharsis of Good Friday.

Then suddenly the dazzling joy of the Easter liturgy and its incomparable lightness and relief and triumph led the monk into spring, and the budding woods and the songs of the birds and the smell of the flowers and the first green blades of the coming harvest filled the sunlight with silent Alleluias: and on to another climax of confidence and vision and peace at the Ascension. Then Pentecost gave the whole interior life of the monk a new direction, and he entered the summer and the long series of Sundays that discussed in poetry and music, every phase of Christ's public life and teachings . . .<sup>25</sup>

Merton's purpose in giving this panorama of the liturgical life is to show how the minds of the monks were replete with the poetry and music of Scripture and the chant, as they lived their peaceful agrarian life amid the unspoiled beauties of nature. The symbols and images of the Vulgate became their own, and the commentaries of the Fathers helped them to savor fully the honey of God's word.

It is both paradoxical and significant that Merton, most modern of men, should have found the term of his searching in the age-old liturgy from which his simpler progenitors drew strength and inspiration. Holy Mother Church fills every need of her restless children from this wealth of Scripture and Tradition which forms the setting of her mysteries. Here the Fathers and the Apologists set forth the richness of her dogma and defend its integrity against the questionings of heretics and unbelievers. The majesty of their exposition quiets and awes the querulous intellect, while

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25 Ibid., 296-297.

the beauty of pageantry and symbolism fill the human thirst for beauty. To this feast for the soul Merton has brought the sensitive awareness of an artist and a solicitude for those of his contemporaries who are unaware of its power to satisfy them. These are the qualities that have produced his verses characterized by the urgency of another prophet who cried out: "All you that thirst, come to the waters: and you that have no money, make haste, buy and eat."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Isaias, 55:1.

### CHAPTER III

#### PHASES OF THE LITURGY AS SUBJECT-MATTER FOR MERTON'S POETRY

##### The Liturgical Year

Pope Pius XII in Mediator Dei has defined the sacred liturgy as "the worship which the community of faithful renders to the Founder and through Him to the Heavenly Father. It is, in short, the worship rendered by the Mystical Body of Christ in the entirety of its head and members."<sup>27</sup> Comprising the liturgy are the Mass, the Divine Office, the sacraments and sacramentals. Since the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ is essential to the understanding of liturgical worship, and the Church year with its proper and sanctoral cycles is the framework within which the holy mysteries are represented, poems on these subjects are considered to fall within the scope of this thesis. Moreover, since in the "Benedicite," sung at Lauds, the whole material universe is made to join in God's praise, nature poems which reflect the effect of redemption on creation are also included, for the sacramental view of the universe is characteristic of one who has come to see the whole world bathed in the blood of the Lamb.

As was shown in the previous chapter, Thomas Merton's spiritual life has its foundations in the Church's liturgy. He recommends to other

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27 Pope Pius XII, On the Sacred Liturgy, N.Y., 1948, 20.

Catholic poets and writers that they live the Christian life, the liturgical life, as fully as possible in their state. To live the liturgical life, according to Pius Parsch, means to participate in the worship of the Mystical Christ as He makes present again the mysteries of redemption in the cycles of the Church year. As the feasts and seasons are celebrated, the Mystical Christ is made flesh in His members: He is born, grows, suffers, dies, and rises in them. The liturgical year is not merely a commemoration of the events of Christ's life, nor a procession of religious heroes, the saints, for the edification of the faithful: it is the means Christ established to give and to develop the divine life in His members. "The purpose of the liturgical year is the same as that of the Church, the same for which Christ came on earth: 'in order that they might have life in abundance'."<sup>28</sup> In each of Merton's three volumes are poems which are the artistic echoes of his spiritual response to the feasts of the Church year. They evoke the mood and atmosphere of the mystery as presented in the inspired texts of the Mass and Breviary, and although objective in form, they record the specific interior fruits of liturgical participation, for as Parsch puts it: "We can consider the liturgical year under a twofold aspect: Objectively as the year of divine life, as the life-giving year of the Mystical Christ; subjectively, as the school of Christian perfection."<sup>29</sup>

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28 Le but de l'année ecclésiastique est le même que celui de l'église, celui pour lequel le Christ est venu sur la terre: 'afin qu'ils aient la vie (divine) et qu'ils l'aient en abondance. Pius Parsch, Le Guide dans l'Année Liturgique, Tome 1 cr Mulhouse (Haut-Rhin) 1935, 22.

29 Nous pouvons . . . considérer l'année liturgique sous un double aspect: objectivement, comme l'année de la vie divine, comme l'année vitale due Christ mystique; subjectivement, comme l'école formatrice de la

In this chapter beginning with the Church's New Year's Day, the first Sunday of Advent, the poetry of Merton will be considered under the various divisions of the liturgical year. It is proposed to show how they reflect the spirit of the seasons. Technical qualities will be noted only incidentally.

Advent, which begins the liturgical year, is a season of hope and silent expectancy: a preparation for the coming of Christ by grace in the celebration of Christmas and for His second coming in majesty at the end of time. Though it is a time of penitence, since the Christian must hearken to John's exhortation to "Prepare the ways of the Lord, make straight His paths," a quiet joy in union with Mary characterizes the four weeks of waiting. The texts of the liturgy are the most poetic in the ritual; metaphor and imagery abound, as in Isaiah's ardent "Drop down dew, ye heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain the Just One. Let the earth be opened and bud forth a Savior."<sup>30</sup>

Merton has caught the spirit of the season in his "Advent." He apostrophizes the quiet winter skies and sees in the full moon an image of the gentle Virgin travelling to Bethlehem. The lovely line: "Time falls like manna at the corners of the wintry earth," brings out the element of expectancy, as does the metaphor "We have become . . . more wakeful than the patient hills." Advent's deep recollection is imaged when Merton writes

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perfection chrétienne. Ibid., 26.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, N.Y., 1946, 51.  
N.B. All poems will be foot-noted from the title and not from the individual quoted lines.

that:

Minds as meek as beasts  
Stay close at home in the sweet hay;  
And intellects are quieter than the flocks that  
feed by starlight.

The very cadence of the poem suggests the peaceful darkness of Advent nights.

After the season of expectancy has run its course, the "admirabile commercium" of the Incarnation is celebrated in the Christmas mystery, and Merton re-created the Christian response of praise and adoration in "The Dark Encounter."<sup>31</sup> The particular grace which, in the mind of the Church, is to be derived from the contemplation of the Word made Flesh, and for which the liturgy disposes the soul during the weeks of preparation which preceded the feast, is expressed succinctly in the Secret for the Mass at Midnight:

Grant, O Lord, that the oblation which we offer in today's festival may be acceptable unto Thee, and, by Thy grace, through this sacred and most holy intercourse, may we be found like unto Him in Whom our substance is united to Thee.

This contact of the soul with Christ at the re-enactment of the Incarnation revealed, is described by Merton under the descriptive metaphor of "The Dark Encounter." The title is particularly apt, since it expresses the stillness and mystery of the midnight birth which Parech signalizes in his explanation of the liturgy of the holy night: "The atmosphere of Advent is noticed still in the first Mass. The God of Majesty, surrounded with light hovers above the earth and the Mother, the Virgin, most pure, is the only earthly being

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31. Ibid., 84.



who approaches the Divine Infant. Humanity is still in waiting, in the shadows of night."<sup>32</sup>

The poem might be a description of any night when "All intuition and desire lie destroyed, When Substance is our Conqueror," in the "incredible" possession of God in the prayer of contemplation. However, the first and last stanzas, identical, describe so vividly the circumstances, setting, and doctrinal consequences of the coming of Christ, "our intrepid Visitor", to earth, that the application to the feast seems justifiable:

O night of admiration, full of choirs,  
O night of deepest praise,  
And darkness full of triumph:  
What secret and intrepid Visitor  
Has come to crack our sepulchre?  
He softly springs the locks of death  
In the foretold encounter.

In an utterly different mood is his "Holy Child's Song,"<sup>33</sup> a tender, imaginative lyric in which the Infant Jesus, "sweeter than any bird" sings to the poet "When midnight occupied the porches of (his) reason." This is no sentimental effusion, but like all Merton's poetry, is based on the doctrinal implications of the event of Christ's life he is celebrating in his verse, although some strained similes and metaphors mar the perfection of this poem. The flesh of the Child, for example, is compared to "a smiling cloud," and

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32 L'impression de L'avent se remarque encore dans la première messe. Le Dieu de Majesté, environée de lumière volent au-dessus de la terre, et la Mère, la Vierge très pure, est le seul être terrestre qui approche l'infant divine. L'humanité est encore dans l'attente, dans les ombres de la nuit. Parsch, 217.

33 Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 153.

Morton has Him declare that:

My incarnate songs Fly in and out the branches of  
 My childish voice  
 Like thrushes in a tree . . .

Too, His Mother is described as "pretty as a Church"; still, the total effect of innocent joy, the spirit of Christ's exultant: "Behold I come," is dominant in the piece. The concluding lines of invitation and instruction addressed to the shepherds are fully satisfying in the appropriateness of their imagery:

Therefore, come, shepherds, from your rocky hill,  
 And bend about My crib in wonder and adore My joy.  
 My glances are as good as wine.  
 The little rivers of my smile  
 Will wash away all ruins from your eyes . . .  
 This seeming winter is your spring  
 When skies put off their armor:  
 Because My Heart already holds the  
 Secret mortal wound,  
 By which I shall transform all deserts into garden ground:  
 And there the peaceful trees  
 All day say credos, being full of leaves —  
 And I will come and be your noon-day sun  
 And make your shadows palaces of moving light:  
 And you will show Me your flowers.

Immediately following the Nativity celebration, the Church interrupts the historical sequence of Christ's life to commemorate the feasts of St. Stephen, St. John, and the Holy Innocents:

The Church re-clothes herself and us in a garment which appears to her most magnificent in which to receive the King. It is the garment described in the Apocalypse: 'clothed in white garments, with palms in their hands.' Thus the first day we go before the Lord as martyrs, the second, as virgins, and the third as martyrs and virgins. On Christmas Day The Lamb appeared on the mystic mount of Sion, and the Church, on the three following days, reunite around Him his glorious and most dear

escort: 'They sing a new canticle before the throne.'<sup>34</sup>

The last of these feasts inspired the "Flight into Egypt,"<sup>35</sup> a poem which according to Brewer's analysis, combines the surrealist and imagist techniques to give a vivid description of the slaughter of the innocents and the escape of the Christ Child.<sup>36</sup> The first stanza is a model of the compression and economy of imagist verse:

Through every precinct of the windy city  
Squadroned iron resounds upon the street;  
Herod's police  
Makes shudder the dark steps of the tenements  
At the business about to be done.

In the surrealist conclusion, Merton writes:

Go, Child of God, upon the singing desert,  
Where with eyes of flame,  
The roaming lion keeps Thy road from harm.

Why is the desert described as "singing"? or who is the roaming lion with eyes of flame? The poet does not reveal this. He has conveyed the idea that the Child proceeds under God's protection by the use of images which

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34 L'Eglise de revêt et nous revêt du vêtement qui lui paraît le plus magnifique pour recevoir le Roi. C'est le vêtement qui décrit l'Apocalypse: 'vêtus de vêtements blancs avec des palmes dans leurs mains.' Ainsi le premier jour nous allons au-devant du Seigneur comme martyrs, le second jour comme vierges et le troisième jour comme martyrs et vierges. Le jour de Noël, l'Agneau est apparu sur la montagne mystique de Sion, et l'Eglise, les trois jours qui suivent, réunit autour de Lui son escort lumineuse la plus intime: 'Ils chantent un cantique nouveau devant le trône. Parsch, 229.

35 Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 114.

36 Paul E. Brewer, A Study of the Style and Content of the Poems of Thomas Merton, Unpublished Master's Thesis, Loyola University, 1949, 56.

the event suggests to him personally. This poem surely marks a transition from the early work of Merton to his later, more satisfying poems.

The majestic feast of the Epiphany, God's manifestation to all men and the celebration of the nuptials of divinity with humanity, has evoked only a simple, lovely "carol"<sup>37</sup> from Merton. In picturing the procession of the Magi, he reflects that:

We unnumbered children of the wicked centuries  
Come after with our penances and prayers,  
And lay them down in the sweet-smelling hay  
Beside the wisemen's golden jars.

This sense of the immediacy of each re-enactment of a mystery and its application to the participants is characteristic of all Merton's liturgical poetry.

The Christmas cycle closes in the soft glow of candle flame, as Holy Church bids her children carry Christ, the Lumen ad revelationem gentium to all with whom they associate in the contacts of daily life. As Simeon received the Infant in his arms, so does each Christian take the lighted symbol of Christ's humanity to carry into the world's darkness and unbelief. Merton describes this mystery in "The Candlemas Procession":<sup>38</sup>

Look kindly Jesus, where we come,  
New Simeons to kindle,  
Each at Your infant sacrifice his own life's candle.

And when Your flame turns into many tongues,  
See how the One is multiplied among us, hundreds!  
And goes among the humble and consoles our sinful kindred.

This concept of the extension of the incarnation in the Mystical Body of

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37 Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 52.

38 Ibid., 56.

Christ finds poetic expression again and again in Merton's verses.

Whether to include at all as an example of liturgical poetry the selection "Ash Wednesday"<sup>39</sup> presents a problem. It does no more than show Merton's consciousness of the progression of the Church year, since it is one of the most extreme of his modernist writings. It is "a deliberate mining of the veins of imagery buried in the poet's subconscious",<sup>40</sup> as one critic defines all surrealist poetry. The "naked traveller" may be Christ suffering and dying for the unheeding "sleepers, prisoners in a lovely world of weeds," who, after his violent death "sit up in their graves with a white cry and die of terror at the stranger's murder." In the same technique is "Prophet"<sup>41</sup> where the personality of John the Baptist, "honeycomb, beggar-bread eater" is pictured in a series of subjective images suggested by the Lenten season.

Dom Gueranger brings out an effect of liturgical participation which is illustrated in much of Merton's poetical work and is especially noticeable in his poems on Holy Week: "There are some souls so far acted upon by the Divine succession of the Catholic cycle that they experience even a physical effect from each evolution; the supernatural life has gained ascendancy over the natural, and the kalendar of the Church makes them forget that of the astronomers. . ."<sup>42</sup> For Merton the succession of

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>40</sup> Elizabeth Drew, Directions in Modern Poetry, Norton, N.Y. 1940, 84.

<sup>41</sup> Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 115.

<sup>42</sup> Prosper Gueranger, The Liturgical Year: Advent, Westminster, Maryland, 1950, 13.

the seasons is symbolic, and the weather characteristic of them reminds him of the mystery being considered by the Church at that time. "The Vine"<sup>43</sup> is his meditation on viewing a fierce end-of-winter storm which has ravaged the vineyard at Gethsemane on Holy Thursday. Compunction at the remembrance of past sins floods in on the Christian during the re-enactment of the Passion, and this sentiment is helped by the sight of the desolation the storm left.

A mob of winds, on Holy Thursday, come like murderers  
And batter the walls of our locked and terrified souls.  
Our doors are down and our defense is done.  
Good Friday rains in Roman order,  
March with sharpest lances up our vineyard hill.

Surely this is a more satisfying and effective use of simile and metaphor than that of the imaginative meanderings of his surrealist experiments. The conclusion reflects the joy of the Resurrection after the tempest of the Passion:

As if we had forgotten how the whips of winter and the  
cross of April  
Would all be lost in one bright miracle.  
For look! The vine on Calvary is bright with branches!  
See how the leaves laugh in the light  
And how the whole hill smiles with flowers:  
And know how all our numbered veins must run  
With life like the sweet vine when it is full of sun.

There is an effective use of synesthesia, or the mixing of sense impressions, in this last stanza, which is characteristic of much of Merton's work. Brewer in his study of the style and content of Merton's poetry, maintains that he fails "for the most part" in his use of it,<sup>44</sup> and he cites among

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<sup>43</sup> Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 134, 135.

<sup>44</sup> Brewer, 67.

other examples, these verses:

At noon the sky goes off like a gun  
The day explodes like a bomb.

Surely, the impression of the intense heat of a tropic noon is vividly conveyed by this device. So also, in the stanza under consideration, the laughing leaves and smiling hillside flowers transmit the exultation and paschal joy which follow the sad desolation of the passion and death of Christ. With the risen Savior the soul experiences a renewal of life like the fertile vine bathed in sunlight. Curiously enough, when the number of Merton's liturgical poems is considered, there is none in celebration of the greatest of all feasts, Easter; only the few lines quoted above from "The Vine," suggest the exultant victory of the Resurrection.

Continuing his poetic panorama of the Church year is "Whitsun Canticle"<sup>45</sup> which celebrates the Ascension and the descent of the Holy Ghost. The poet describes first the scene on Olivet where:

Heaven robbed us  
And stole our Christ and sailed Him to the sky!

The miracle of Pentecost regenerates the world, which is admonished to

Sing like spring  
To hear the harvest praising Heaven with a thousand voices.

But the greatest effect of the coming of the Holy Spirit is interior, when He comes in nuptial union to the soul:

But who shall tell the blazes and exchanges  
The hidden lightning and the smiles of blinding night,  
The kiss and vanish of the sudden invitation,  
The game and promise of espousal?

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<sup>45</sup> Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 92-95.

The poem celebrates especially that gift of the Spirit which is the right to call God "Abba, Father."

We speak you plain and humble in the terms of prayer  
Whatever talk you grant us.

In the Rule of St. Benedict, the holy legislator tells his disciples that "Prayer ought to be short and pure, unless, perhaps, it is lengthened by the inspiration of divine grace."<sup>46</sup> This poem accents the dependence of the soul on the Holy Spirit for the length and character of its prayer:

One day we run among the rocks as lithe as lions  
But it is better that, the next, You tame our jubilee,  
And prune our praises lean as supplication.

On the exultant feast of Pentecost, however, the Paraclete is lavish with consolation, but the poet is wary of the spiritual danger of revelling in these interior pleasures, of seeking them for themselves, and so he prays:

Forgive us, always, for our clumsy wills  
Reeling with the possession of so pure a pleasure  
Stumble and break the bottles of our Pentecost.

Finally, in the quiet Envoy, he asks the Holy Spirit to:

Build us a monastery, yes, forever, . . .  
In the full fields of gentle heaven,

so that the hearts and eyes may be occupied in "Sounding Your will, Your peace in its unbounded fathoms."

This is one of the poems which has earned for Merton the title: "Poet of Contemplation," one which must embarrass him by the implied competition with St. John of the Cross whose right to it is better established. Whenever Merton writes of prayer, it is the fruit of his reflections on one

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<sup>46</sup> Boniface, Verheyen, O.S.B., tr., The Holy Rule of Our Most Holy Father Benedict, 8th ed., Atchison, Kansas, 1935, Chapter XX, 45.



of the feasts-or mysteries of the Church; the liturgy is the primary source of his poetic inspiration.

In addition to these selections celebrating the temporal cycle, Merton has been especially inspired by two feasts from the sanctoral: The Annunciation and the Visitation. There is an evident tenderness in His Marian poems, and the fruitfulness of nature is a favorite metaphor for the Virgin Mother. In "The Messenger,"<sup>47</sup> the flowers and grasses, awakened by the coming of the warrior sun, are told that:

Yours were the eyes that saw some  
Star-sandalled stranger walk like lightning down the air  
The morning the mother of God  
Loved and dreaded the message of an angel.

This poem is another which typifies the division in Merton's style. Who the sentry is who stands "at the rim of winter" and who knows of "the lasting strife of tears And the way the world is strung," is not apparent. All the reader is told is that

He waits to warn all life with the tongue of March's bugle,  
Of the coming of the warrior sun.

From here on, however, the poem offers no difficulty. In it the poet sees the awakening life of nature in early spring as witnesses of the angelic salutation.

In "Aubade - The Annunciation,"<sup>48</sup> another reflection on the same mystery, the dim light of early morning strikes the Marian window of the Abbey, and the Angelus bells ring all over the country-side. As her "slow

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<sup>47</sup> Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 121.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 144.

words move," the picture of the Annunciation scene rises to the minds of those who recite the prayer. The "innocent love" and the "desires" (which) glitter in her mind like morning stars" invite the angel, and "her name is softly spoken Like a meteor falling."

In the next stanza are underlined some of the descriptive techniques for which Merton has been criticized:

She can no longer hear the shrill day  
Sing in the east,  
 Nor see the lovely woods begin to toss their manes.  
 The rivers have begun to sing.  
 The little clouds shine in the air like girls.  
 She has no eyes to see their faces.

With the exception of this single stanza, however, the poem is technically and devotionally satisfying in its evocation of Mary's material peace after her fiat contrasted with the winter barrenness of the waiting world.

In the later poem, "The Evening of the Visitation,"<sup>49</sup> there is no evidence of strained imagery; however, "The full moon, wise queen" on her evening journey across the summer sky, reminds the poet of Mary on her visit to Zachary's home. All nature is in peaceful sleep, but the fruitfulness of the coming harvest portends the fruitfulness of Mary's maternity, and the abbey windows "fill and sweeten with the mild vespers of the hay and barley." The moon and rising stars pour "gentle benediction" on the monastery, reminding the wakeful poet of the "far subtler and more holy influence" by which Mother Mary blesses every corner of the house of God, "smiling by night upon her sleeping children: O gentle Mary, Our lovely mother in heaven."

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<sup>49</sup> Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 136.

Faced with devotional poetry of this nature, one critic, sympathetic on the whole, asks in honest bewilderment: "Why should Merton write in verse at all? The meaning leaps beyond the poetry . . . and does not seem to need it."<sup>50</sup> The answer to this objection is found in one definition of poetry: "the art by which feeling is conveyed by author to reader in metrical language."<sup>51</sup> Merton chooses poetry to convey his emotional response to an inspiration simply because he could not obtain the same effect by the use of prose. "Cantare amantis est," said St. Augustine, "to sing is the mark of a lover," and this maxim accounts for the young Trappist's verses.

The liturgical cycle closes with the twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost, on which the Church celebrates by anticipation the final coming of Christ as judge at the end of time. In early Christian times the Parousia was looked forward to with desire as the day when the Savior will take final possession of His kingdom. The medieval and modern views of this event are characterized by fear; the exultant expectancy of primitive Christianity has been tempered by realization of sin and forgetfulness of God. The liturgy still retains the ancient tone, however. The Advent cry of Maranatha refers to the second coming of Christ in glory as well as to His first, in lowliness and poverty. Merton's references to the Parousia reflect this sense of exultation and impatient desire. This is especially noteworthy in the title poem of Figures for an Apocalypse, already commented

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<sup>50</sup> Richard Eberhart, "Four Poets," Sewanee Review, 55, Spring, 1947, 371.

<sup>51</sup> James Harry Smith, The Reading of Poetry, N. Y., 1939, 371.

upon. It recurs in "The Peril,"<sup>52</sup> where faithful Christians, armed against the final terrors of the world's dissolution, cry out with joy: "It is the Bridegroom comes like lightning where we never looked!" In a series of not-too-enlightening paradoxes, the soul begs the conquering Christ:

Rob me and make me poor enough to bear my priceless ransom;  
Lock me and dower me in the gifts and jails of tribulation:  
Stab me and save me with the five lights on Your crucifixion!  
And I'll become as strong as wax, as weak as diamonds . . .

In another mood the pensive lyric "How Long We Wait"<sup>53</sup> expresses intense desire for the deferred coming of the Bridegroom, and yearningly the poet asks:

O earth, when will you wake in the green wheat,  
And all our Trappist cedars sing:  
Bright land, life up your leafy gates!  
You abbey steeples, sing with bells!  
For loek, our Sun rejoices like a dancer  
On the rim of our hills.

It is evident that almost every mystery of the temporal cycle has inspired Merton to poetic reflection. To paraphrase Wordsworth, one could describe this portion of his work as "the personal fruits of liturgical participation recollected in tranquillity." In the community celebration of the sacred mysteries to which St. Benedict enjoined "nothing may be preferred," the poet has found an inexhaustible source of inspiration, for as Marmion explains: "Although it is always the same Saviour, the same Jesus pursuing the same work of our sanctification, each mystery . . . is a fresh manifestation of Christ for us; each has its special beauty, its particular

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52 Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 50.

53 Ibid., 53.

splendor, as likewise its own grace."<sup>54</sup>

### Mary and the Saints

Besides the seasonal representation of the Christian mysteries, new feasts were added in the course of centuries to commemorate the Christian heroes constantly being added to the roster of the saints. Cabrol describes the need which gave rise to this change, in the following passage:

Accustomed to seek a mediator and to take refuge in Christ in order to obtain pardon from sin, the Christian was led to seek intercessors. The more he realized the greatness of God and his own misery, the more keenly he felt the need of protection. Next to the son of God Himself, therefore, he sought refuge with His Blessed Mother; he coveted the patronage of the friends of God who, having suffered death for love of Him, now enjoy endless peace and happiness in His presence.<sup>55</sup>

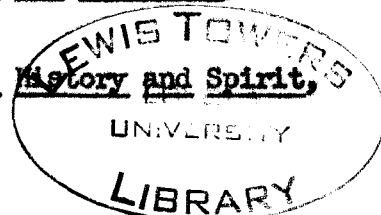
Merton has reflected this Christian instinct in his poetry on Mary and the Saints. Besides the Marian poems already commented on, which are more appropriately treated in the temporal cycle, there are others in which the poet praises some attribute of the Mother of God. In an elaborate conceit evidencing the influence of the early metaphysical poets: "The Blessed Virgin Mary Compared to a Window",<sup>56</sup> he ingeniously develops Mary's surrender to God, her stainlessness, her co-redemption, her gift of Christ, Lumen Christi, to us under the figure of transparent glass. Robert Lowell, winner of the Pulitzer prize for his Lord Weary's Castle, does not admire this

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<sup>54</sup> Dom Columba Marmion, O.S.B., Christ in His Mysteries, St. Louis, 1939, 22.

<sup>55</sup> Fernand Cabrol, Liturgical Prayer, its History and Spirit, Westminster, Maryland, 1950, 178.

<sup>56</sup> Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 142.



device:

One of Merton's faults is a contrivance that he may have learned from Crashaw . . . the atomic conceit: each conceit is an entity, and the whole poem is seldom much more than the sum of its parts, often it is considerably less . . . he is using the old device as an artist, not as an antiquarian. At the same time, he follows so closely on the heels of his predecessors that the capacity of his vision is narrowed.<sup>57</sup>

It is true that this poem, in which every stanza develops another excellence of Mary suggested by the image of a window, does seem more of an ingenious meditative exercise than an esthetic experience. Some lines, as these, have a strong appeal:

For light, my lover, steals my life in secret.  
I vanish into day and leave no shadow  
But the geometry of my cross,  
Whose frame and structure are the strength  
By which I die, but only to my earth,  
And am uplifted to the sky, my life.

"To the Immaculate Virgin on a Winter Night"<sup>58</sup> is as austere as its setting. It is the bitter plaint of a lover of Mary, convinced of her intercessory power, that she is not invoked in a world at war. Nature's mood reflects the poet's own:

Lady, the night is falling and the dark  
Steals all the blood from the scarred West.  
The stars come out and freeze my heart  
With drops of untouchable music, frail as ice  
And bitter as the New Year's cross.

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<sup>57</sup> Robert Lowell, "The Verses of Thomas Merton," Commonweal, XLII, July 22, 1945, 240-242.

<sup>58</sup> Merton, Tears of the Blind Lions, 27.

The pathetic fallacy<sup>59</sup> in these lines does not destroy the effectiveness of the stanza, and the metaphor of music serves as prelude to this passionate query that is the burden of the poem:

Where in the world has any voice  
Prayed to you, Lady, for the peace that's in your power?  
In a day of blood and many beatings  
I see the governments rise up, behind the steel horizon,  
And take their weapons and begin to kill.

To Merton, Mary is Virgo potens, Virgo Clemens, queen and mistress of the world. He invokes her with confidence in her concern for all man's ills, since she is co-redemptrix of the human race. There is no softness nor sentimentality in his veneration.

Of the Saints, John the Baptist claims the poet's highest admiration, and he invokes the precursor as patron of the Trappist life and his model in the school of contemplative prayer. The uncompromising asceticism of the saint, his years of prayerful solitude in preparation for his role of readying his people for the advent of the Savior, his discernment of religious hypocrisy and the supernatural violence of his merited castigations of it appeal powerfully to Merton, who here conceives the modern Cistercian monk as another forerunner heralding the longed-for coming of Christ in the Parousia:

You are the first Cistercian and the greatest Trappist;  
Never abandon us, your few but faithful children,  
For we remember your amazing life  
Where you laid down for us the form and pattern of our  
love for Christ

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<sup>59</sup> "In the nineteenth century John Ruskin coined the phrase 'pathetic fallacy' to describe the description of human thoughts, feelings and actions in non-human beings." Lawrence Zillman, Writing Your Poem, N.Y., 1950, 90.

Being so close to Him you were His Twin.  
 O buy us, by your intercession, in your mighty heaven,  
 Not your great name, St. John, or ministry,  
 But oh, your solitude and death:  
 And most of all, gain us your great command of graces,  
 Making our poor hands also fountains full of life and  
     wonder  
 Spending, in endless rivers to the universe  
 Christ, in secret, and His Father, and His Sanctifying  
     Spirit.<sup>60</sup>

Beautiful as the thought of this conclusion assuredly is, the prosaic quality of its expression is regrettable, since so many verses of the piece are genuinely poetic. This poem is in three parts: the first describes the mission of the Baptist and his rejection by the learned among the Jews. Merton is always comforted by the thought of the vindication of God's justice on the last day, and the section from which the following lines are taken describes the confusion of those who have been unheeding of John's inspired message:

This is the day that you shall hear and hate  
 The voice of His beloved servant.  
 This is the day your scrutiny shall fear  
 A terrible and peaceful angel, dressed in skins  
 Knowing it is your greedy eyes, not his, that die of hunger.  
 For God has known and loved him from his mother's womb,  
 Remembering his name, filling his life with grace,  
 Teaching him prophecy and wisdom,  
 To burn before the face of Christ,  
 Name Him and vanish like a proclamation.

The second part of the poem addresses three questions to St. John which he answers in cadences and imagery reminiscent of "The Dark Night of the Soul." In these stanzas various qualities of St. John's character are extolled in the direct simplicity of the saint's responses. His singleness of purpose and purity of intention, his appreciation of the fruitfulness of

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60 Merton, "St. John Baptist," A Man in the Divided Sea, 102.



his desert apostolate, his advance in the life of prayer, in the dry regions where he was freed "from image and from concept and from desire" are all indicated. The metaphor in these lines is extremely rich.

I learned my hands could hold  
Rivers of water  
And spend them like an everlasting treasure.  
I learned to see the waking desert  
Smiling to behold me with the springs her ransom,

Open her clear eyes in a miracle of transformation,  
And the dry wilderness  
Suddenly dressed in meadows,  
All garlanded with an embroidery of flowering orchards  
Sang with a virgin's voice  
Descending to her wedding in these waters  
With the Prince of Life.  
All barrenness and death lie drowned  
Here in the fountains he has sanctified  
And the deep harps of Jordan  
Play to the contrite world as sweet as heaven.

Merton addresses the saint prayerfully in the third part, asking especially for the grace to lead a life of co-redemptive sacrifice. The ardor of this prayer is repeated in a later poem: "St. John's Night."<sup>61</sup> All over Languedoc the villages light fires on the night of the saint's feast, but " . . . in our hearts, here in another nation Is made your deep midsummer night. It is a night of other fires." It is the fire of prayerful desire for contemplation that the poet sees enkindled, and he asks with ardor:

When shall we have to eat the things we have barely tasted?  
When shall we have your own vast loneliness's holy honeycomb?  
. . . Clean us and lead us in the new night with the power of  
Elias

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<sup>61</sup> Merton, Figures for an Apocalypse, 58.

And find us out the summits of the love and prayer  
That Wisdom wants of us, O Bridegroom's friend.

There is one more long poem on the Precursor: "The Quickening of St. John the Baptist."<sup>62</sup> Here, however, Merton's favorite meditation on St. John as patron of the hidden life seems strained and artificial, though there are, as usual, compensating verses of great beauty. The Virgin of Nazareth leaves in haste—"her clothes like sails"—the ordinary world of farms, fishing boats, market and gardens "lovely among the lemon trees," and enters Elizabeth's house. Her eyes "as grey as Doves" alight on "miraculous Elizabeth," and the unborn John is sanctified in his mother's womb. Then, however, the "wild bairn exulting in his hermitage" leaps, and we are told that for him "to kick is contemplata tradere," a statement which, if ingenious, is certainly not poetic, introducing as it does, almost a ludicrous element into the sacred scene. This is the Gospel incident in which Merton sees a perfect parallel of the elements of a Cistercian vocation. For the Trappists lie buried in the cloister as John in Elizabeth's womb, "planted in the night of contemplation Sealed in the dark and waiting to be born." Mary, the monks' Theotocos, appears upon their mountain again "with her clothes like sails . . . ."

Then like the wise, wild baby,  
The unborn John who could not see a thing  
We wake and know the Virgin presence  
Receive her Christ into our night  
With stars of an intelligence as white as lightning.

To complete the analogy, the Trappists, startlingly, "bound and bounce with

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62 Merton, The Tears of the Blind Lions, N. Y., 1949, 8-9.

happiness Leap in the womb, our cloud, our faith, our element, our contemplation, our anticipated heaven. . . ." This poem represents Merton at his most exuberant worst in the unsuitability of its images and diction. It is the more disconcerting, therefore, to encounter it in his most recent work.

More saints of asceticism and solitude are celebrated in Merton's "Two Desert Fathers".<sup>63</sup> St. Jerome, translator of the Vulgate is first to be invoked. Again the poet's interest in eschatology is illustrated, since he pictures the saint in the valley of Jehosophat, traditional scene of the last Judgment, wrestling "in the long night's wilderness "With the wild angel, Revelation." Scripture, the Sacred Book itself reveals, is a "two-edged sword extending even to the division of soul and spirit . . . ." <sup>64</sup> Jerome has felt the bright steel of God's Word, has seen in its revelation all things in relation to the final consummation, and his prophetic chiding ". . . severs our midnight like a streak of flying pullmans And challenges our black unhappiness Loud as the lights of an express." This image taken from contemporary civilization is not at all anachronistic but is another illustration of Merton's consciousness of the present reality of the Christian mysteries. St. Jerome is not an historical figure, a saint of past ages; his message is as much for our times as for his own. Repeatedly in Merton's work examples of his realization of the eternal freshness of the Gospel message recur.

The lesson taught by St. Paul the Hermit must be deduced from his

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63 Merton, Figures for an Apocalypse, 50.

64 Hebrews, 4, 12.

life: it is the finding of God in the stillness of contemplation which is prepared for by solitude and renunciation. For St. John the Baptist "contemplata tradere" was the preaching of penance to the people after the Precursor had emerged from his desert fastnesses; for St. Jerome it was the translation of the Greek Septuagint into a language that would make it more readable to the generality of men. St. Paul's function in the Mystical Body was just as real, if less tangible. Merton realizes his apostolate of intercession in these words:

The fair springs of your interminable, wordless prayer  
Went out in secret to transfigure distant cities  
With the picture of your charity.

For his Trappist admirer, he is the "Saint of all great saints, oh! I most envy!" because:

God, God  
The One I hunt and never capture,  
Opened His door, and lo, His loneliness invaded you.

The desire for contemplation, which Merton conceives as wordless, imageless, conceptless absorption in God, pervades his writings on religious subjects. He does not enter into speculation or theological controversy about whether all men are called to the possession of this high prayer; he looks towards its reception with confident expectation, saddened at the often-expressed failure on his own part to dispose himself for the gift of God. This is his description of one common tendency which keeps men from union with God:

Because our minds, lovers of map and line  
Charting the way to heaven with a peck of compasses,  
Plotting to catch our Christ between some numbered parallels  
Trick us with too much logic.

St. Malachy, friend of St. Bernard who died at the former's mon-

astery of Clairvaux, has a poem in his honor, a charming, but not historically accurate fantasy.<sup>65</sup> His feast falls on November 3, the day after his death on All Souls Day. Merton pictures him as a very old man (he died, as a matter of fact, at fifty-four) who announces himself as the saint of the day and silently departs in the evening after the liturgical solemnities in his honor have been concluded. In memory, no doubt, of his Ireland, he brings a downpour of rain with him. "Is it a crosier or a trident in his hand?" the poet asks whimsically. Why "one man believed that we should sing to him some stone-age hymn is a mystery, since the saint departed this life in 1148."<sup>66</sup> The poem is simply a charming reflection upon the pouring rain that the Bishop of troubled Eire sent to signalize his feast.

In a somber mood of contrast is "An Invocation to St. Lucy,"<sup>67</sup> whose feast occurs on December 21. The long winter days are for Merton, always sensitive to nature's symbolism, a reminder of spiritual darkness and the sacrificial efforts of the spiritual life. Yet, though Lucy's "day is in our darkest season," her name is "full of light," and the poet prays that she

Show us some light, who seem forsaken by the sky.

We have so dwelt in darkness that our days are screened and dim.

The concluding lines summarize the significance of the feast and the poet's

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<sup>65</sup> Merton, Tears of the Blind Lions, 19.

<sup>66</sup> Butler, Alban, The Lives of the Fathers Martyrs and Other Principal Saints, Baltimore, 1889, 263.

<sup>67</sup> Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 63.

theme with beauty and conciseness:

Hallow the Vespers and December of our life, O martyred Lucy:  
Console our solstice with your friendly day.

The poems representative of this section have illustrated once more the doctrinal objectivity of Merton's religious poetry on Mary and the Saints. It is the Virgin Queen, beautiful in selfless surrender, powerful priestess and intercessor whom he celebrates in his verses. The spiritual heroes of his predilection are the Fathers, the Forerunner of Christ and his strong Cistercian forbears.

#### Poems on the Mass

Holy Mass has been compared to the heart and sun of the liturgy. Although so many of Merton's poems concern the Divine Office, rays of the life-giving sacrifice, and the liturgical year which is its setting, comparatively few poems concern the Mass itself, although the selections which are found show a deep appreciation of the Holy Sacrifice as the oblation of the Whole Christ. The explanation for this lacuna in his liturgical subject matter is perhaps best explained by Merton himself who admits frankly in an autobiographical sketch in which he treats of the outstanding spiritual influences in his life:

I cannot write much here about this third and most tremendous step in my conversion. Its effects are only just beginning dimly to dawn on me. I am just beginning to see something of the breadth of the new horizons which are opened up before me by the Christ of my daily Mass.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Merton, "The White Pebble," Where I Found Christ, N.Y., 1951, 246.

In "The Sponge Full of Vinegar,"<sup>69</sup> the physical passion of Christ is linked with its renewal in the Mass and with the realization of each member's responsibility for the suffering of the Head. There is a stark picture of the dying Christ Who thirsted:

But the world's gall and all its rotten vinegar  
Reeked in the sponge, flamed on His swollen mouth.

Then application is made to the poet's own soul in an exclamation full of self-knowledge and compunction:

O Lord, when I lie breathless in Thy Churches  
Knowing it is Thy glory goes again  
Torn from the wise world in the daily crack of Massbells,  
I drink new fear from the four clean prayers I ever gave Thee!

The reason for this fear is that all his acts are "gallsavored of flesh"; this is an echo of the constant plaint of the Saints whose own imperfections and impure motives are brought into such vivid relief by union with the infinitely pure God through prayer.

In "Canticle for the Blessed Virgin,"<sup>70</sup> Mary, Mediatrix of all grace, is invoked:

You hold the Mass keys and the locks of Calvary  
And all-grace springs in the founts of your demand.

The poet prays to Mary to win him the grace of the priesthood, unless he is "too unworthy of the Liturgy." In this case he asks that she

Make me, until my death, His priest in secret  
Offering Mass in all-day's sacrifice.  
Teach me to take all grace

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69 Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 155.

70 Merton, Figures for an Apocalypse, 44.

And spring it into blades of act,  
Grow sheaves and spears of charity,  
While each new instant, (new eternity)  
Flowering with clean and individual circumstance,  
Speaks me the whisper of His consecrating Spirit.  
Then will obedience bring forth new Incarnations  
Shining to God with the features of His Christ.

The drama of the Mass at the world's end is the subject of "Senescente Mundo,"<sup>71</sup> another of the eschatological poems already remarked on. The poet pictures the prelude to the end of the world—its last ages—when amid the ruin and desolation the Kingdom of God, a "whole new universe" will spring up, and he reflects exultantly:

Here in my hands I hold that secret Easter,  
Tomorrow this will be my Mass's answer.

In a less prophetic mood is "Holy Mass,"<sup>72</sup> Merton's latest published poem on this subject. The setting is St. Joseph's Infirmary, Louisville, Kentucky. The time is indicated in the title: the dawn is Merton's favorite hour, as his "Aubade" poems witness. This piece records his meditation on the celebration of the holy mysteries for the nuns who service the hospital: "Dear, hasty doves, transparent in His sun!" The compression of his invitation to them is noteworthy:

Come to the golden fence with folded hands  
And see your Bird, kneel to your white Beloved.  
Here is your Father at my finger's end!

But this Mass in a small chapel has effects far beyond its limit of space and

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71 Merton, Tears of the Blind Lions, 31.

72 Merton, Thomas, "Early Mass," The Commonweal, LVI, 48.  
April 18, 1952.



time. Those who assist at it are "the makers of a risen world." They are fed with the Bread of the Word and of the Holy Sacraments, and so they are one in Him Whose temple their daily work of healing restores.

This poem, which is not included in Merton's published collections, is among the last he has written to date. It is noteworthy especially for its disciplined conciseness and power of suggestion. There are many end-stopped lines which are epigrammatic in effect:

There is a Bread which You and I propose.  
It is Your Truth. And more: it is ourselves.

Here is economy of words with tremendous overtones, found again in this stanza:

Death has a wasted kingdom, though the world is wounded,  
Blessing, restore the blind, straighten the broken limb.  
These mended souls shall build Jerusalem.

Merton's few poems on the Mass are, then, rich in doctrine fully assimilated and given artistic form. For Merton the Mass is an overwhelming force. Christ and His members offer themselves in sacrifice for the world's redemption. Daily the holocaust is renewed, redeeming God's world: "the power which has secretly shaped all history until now, and which is fast preparing the final revelation of the sons of God in Christ Jesus."<sup>73</sup>

### The Divine Office

The Divine Office is well defined as "the Church's praise, spreading out from its center, the Mass, over the rest of the day."<sup>74</sup> Of the seventy

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<sup>73</sup> Merton, "The White Pebble," 245, 246.

<sup>74</sup> Dom Iltyd Trethowan, O.S.B., Christ in the Liturgy.

two chapters in St. Benedict's Rule, fourteen are concerned explicitly with regulations for the performance of the Divine Office, and three more mention it in chapters devoted to prayer. The patriarch of monks refers to it as the "Opus Dei," and to insure the proper performance of this duty, he legislates for the memorization of the Psalter and for the study of the sacred texts so that the monks can "sing wisely, the mind and voice being in accord." It is natural, therefore, that Merton, trained in this religious tradition, should incorporate poems inspired by the psalmody in his collected works.

In "After the Night Office - Gethsemane Abbey,"<sup>75</sup> the Trappist describes the recollected private prayer that is the fruit of the recitation of Matins in this rich figure:

Minds unfold the Word, our Guest . . . the lances of the morning  
Fire all their gold against the steeple and the water tower,  
Returning to the windows of our deep abode of peace,  
Emerging at our conscious doors  
We find our souls all soaked in grace, like Gedeon's fleece.

Two poems take the form of responsories found in the Divine Office. These are alternate dialogues between cantor and choir. The latter repeats a verse or part of a verse or refrain at intervals or pauses in the cantor's prayer. This method of psalmody is very ancient, being much in use among the Jews. It is a natural development of the parallelism of the psalms. Cabrol has this to say of its affinity with poetry:

The constant swaying of the thought between the repetitions seems, as it were, gently to lull the soul; sometimes the shock of unexpected antithesis will rudely awaken her, and forth flies the poetic spark.

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<sup>75</sup> Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 78.

Religious thought, too, often draws great strength and marvellous beauty from its use.<sup>76</sup>

Merton makes use of this device first in "The Word - a Responsory."<sup>77</sup> Here he takes the phrase from Psalm 144: "Eructavit cor meum verbum bonum." The poet interprets the "good word" as the second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Word of God, Whom his heart utters in desire and love. It is the Word Who is revealed in nature's beauty "for without Him was made nothing that was made." It is the Word, too, who espoused human nature and Who enters into every human heart that wants Him with the ardor expressed in these lines:

Whose name is "Savior,"  
Whom we desire to hold;  
Burn in our hearts, burn in our living marrow, own our being  
Hide us and heal us in the hug of Thy delight,  
Whose admirable might  
Sings in the furnace of the Triple Glory.  
Eructavit cor meum verbum bonum.

This last line of the poem concludes the piece with a word play, for here "verbum bonum" is the author's encomium on his own reflections; not the Word of God, Whose perfections he has sung in the previous verses.

In "St. Agnes - A Responsory,"<sup>78</sup> the theme and refrain is:

Gujus pulchritudinem  
Sol et luna mirantur .  
Ipsi soli servo fidem.<sup>79</sup>

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76 Cabrol, 15.

77 Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 82.

78 Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 152.

79 "Whose beauty the sun and moon admire. For Him alone I keep my troth." Psalm 144.

Each of these phrases is enlarged on in praise of Christ:

Who smiles into the sun His looking-glass  
And fills it with His glorious face:  
Who utters the round moon's recurring O  
And drowns our dusks in peace.

And in praise of His youthful bride, the child martyr whom he envisions as:

Spending the silver of her little life  
To bring her Bridegroom these bright flowers  
Of which her arms are full.

The responsorial form deserves extended use in Catholic poetry.

The recurrence of the refrain emphasizes the theme and contributes an effect of stately simplicity and a rhythm all its own. It differs from the refrain as ordinarily employed, since it has logical connection with the substance of the poem, the verses being an extension of the idea it expresses.

"Clairvaux"<sup>80</sup> sings of the peace and prayer and natural beauty of Bernard's cloister. Merton goes to the office for a simile to express the beauty and symmetry of the architecture: "These arches live together like psalm and antiphon." And he apostrophizes the bells of the abbey:

O pay us, beg us, bells, our daily Christ  
As every midnight, noon and evening  
Dawns our glorious rescue  
In hymn and antiphon and psalm.

In this poem the evidence of Gerard Manley Hopkins's strong influence on Merton is very obvious. A single stanza will give many similarities to Hopkins's style. The stately, slow beat of sprung rhythm is here, the compoundings and inversions of word order which were so noticeable a characteristic

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80 Ibid., 103.

characteristic of the Jesuit poet:

Now, fall, time, slow bells spending,  
 Spilling the hours, oh, the night-song, day-song,  
 All the intervals, work's end  
 Into the deep woods and farthest forest, vale's heart, glade  
     and bottom  
 Home-call sending grange and sheep-fold wheat and rye-field,  
 Prayerword telling, home to be in cloister court,  
 Under the arches, reading by the door-sill  
 Praying in uncarven choir-stall,  
 By plain altars, cowed adorers, where Christ hangs and  
     hides in golden dove,  
 Dwells in the air above our heads  
 And overshadows all our prayers with His tabernacle wings.

The character of reparation in the Divine Office is metaphorically expressed in "The Trappist Abbey: Matins."<sup>81</sup> The summoning bells ring "And fill the echoing dark with love and fear." Merton is always conscious of the living presence of Christ with Whom he is one in the celebration of the liturgy. Here again we have the eternal reality of the historical mysteries of Our Lord's life expressed:

Wake in the windows of Gethsemane, my soul, my sister,  
 For the past years with smokey torches come  
 Bringing betrayal from the burning world  
 And bloodying the glade with pitch flame.

But, if he was once on the side of the murderers, now he mourns for his part in the death of the Innocent One, calling his soul to penitence in these words alive with realization:

Wake in the cloisters of the lonely night, my soul, my sister,  
 Where the Apostles gather, who were, one time, scattered,  
 And mourn God's blood in the place of His betrayal,  
 And weep with Peter at the triple cock-crow.

One who uses the Church's prayer regularly, becomes imbued with a

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<sup>81</sup> Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 140.

social consciousness, a sense of solidarity with all the members of the Mystical Body. Often this concern takes the form of impetration for the needs of persecuted or tempted brethren. In "A Letter to America"<sup>82</sup> Merton gives voice to a preoccupying anxiety born of a realization of the materialism and sensuality that is weaning the country from Christ:

How long are we to wake  
With eyes that turn to walls of blood  
Seeing the hell that gets you from us  
With his treacherous embrace!

Then he mentions an insidious temptation to forget the world's need for redemption and sacrifice, to immerse himself in the joy and peace of his contemplative life, lulling himself with "wishful lies" into a belief that "maybe" the unheeding sons of men have turned to God at last, "And rinsed their mental slums In the clean drench of an incalculable grief." His sense of reality prevails, however, and he faces it in the knowledge that he must dedicate his life to the world's redemption:

But oh! the flowering cancers of that love  
That eats your earth with roots of steel!  
No few fast hours can drain your flesh  
Of all those seas of candied poison.  
Until our long Gregorian cry  
Bows down the stars' Samaritan  
To rue the pity of so cruel a murder.

In these concluding verses Merton voices his realization that his chief work for mankind is the daily sacrifice of liturgical prayer in union with Christ.

This impression of the great efficacy of choir prayer in "restoring all things in Christ" is strengthened in "Rievaulx: St. Ailred."<sup>83</sup> Merton

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82 Merton, Figures for an Apocalypse, 33.

83 Merton, Figures for an Apocalypse, 68.

pictures the abbey of Rievaulx, "White cathedral in the wilderness Arising in her strength and newness as beautiful as Judith." Isolated, far from the busy court intrigues of the troubled times, the white-cowled monks in ranks of prayer obtain from God's majesty the redemption of their contemporaries as they bow in adoration at each Gloria Patri:

Oh who shall tell the glory and the grace-price and the everlasting  
power  
Of what was once the Grey Monks' sacrifice,  
When with slow and ending canticle they broke their choirs  
And bent them to the ground.

Merton summarizes the richness of their prayer in the concluding stanza:

What were your names, you hundred thousand cross-cowled nameless  
saints?  
Burning before the Lord upon the altar of your poverty and love.  
You there destroyed before the face of His great majesty  
All the world's armies and her kingdoms and her centuries of blood  
and fire  
And all her palaces and all her treasuries,  
And the glory of her crowns.

It is this faith in the transforming power of social prayer that illumines the contemplative vocation and explains, too, the paradox that a young man of Merton's cosmopolitan interests and deep realization of the social ills born of rugged individualism and laissez-faire economics, can find in his life as a Trappist his personal contribution to their alleviation. The monk in his choir stall offers in union with Christ the Head of the Mystical Body, a wonderfully fruitful prayer for the needs of all mankind.

Merton has given stronger expression to his appreciation of the redemptive value of his Trappist life in "The Captives - A Psalm."<sup>84</sup> Here he

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<sup>84</sup> Merton, Tears of the Blind Lions, 20.

has modeled his poem on the wrathful psalms of imprecation, paraphrasing in the last part the most sanguinary of all of them, Psalm 136. Merton sees in Wall Street the temple of the false god, money. Here is bred the materialism of modern man:

It is the bulls day. The citizens  
Build themselves each hour another god  
And fry a fatter idol out of mud.

He pictures the degradation of the people, intent only on pampering the body:

Old ladies are treasured in sugar  
Young ones rot in wine.  
The flesh of the fat organizers smiles with oil.

Then, as if through teeth clenched in righteous ire, comes the poet's invective in paraphrase:

Blessed is the army that will one day crush you, city,  
Like a golden spider.  
Blest are they that hate you.  
Blest are they that  
Dash your brats against the stones.  
The children of God have died, O Babylon,  
Of thy wild algebra.

Then in anguish at this vision, the poet adjures himself to a realization of his vocation in which is the only hope of the children of God who have forgotten the promise and gone over to the whore of Babylon:

May my bones burn and ravens eat my flesh  
If I forget thee, contemplation!  
May language perish from my tongue  
If I do not remember thee, O Sion, city of vision  
Whose heights have windows finer than the firmament  
When night pours down her canticles  
And peace sings on thy watchtowers like the stars of Job.

In this poem Merton is indebted to the liturgy not only for his concept, but for the manner of its expression. He knows the continuity of the Old and



New Testaments, and the psalms applied to the defections of the new Israel make his choir prayers vital and meaningful. This preoccupation with the present in the light of the past and in terms of its future significance, is Merton's especial genius. He sees life as a whole, because he views it consistently in supernatural terms.

The choir is the monk's school of prayer, and ascetical writers teach that in the treasures of Scripture and Tradition contained in the Divine Office are to be found all the elements necessary for the development of a rich personal prayer-life. Naturally the religious who recites the office begins to use it as the basis for his private converse with God. In the early monasteries it was customary for the monks to prostrate in silence after every psalm to facilitate the personal assimilation of public prayer. In "A Psalm"<sup>85</sup> Merton describes the recollection induced by a devout recital of the psalter. He begins exuberantly with delight in the beauty of the Office.

When psalms surprise me with their music  
And antiphons turn to rum  
The Spirit sings: the bottom drops out of my soul.

The psalm sings of creation's wonders, evoking example after example of the luxuriant beauty brought forth at God's word.

But sound is never half so fair  
As when that music turns to air  
And the universe dies of excellence.

It is then that the silence of contemplation inundates the soul.

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 30.

While God sings by Himself in acres of night  
And walls fall down, that guarded Paradise.

For Merton, then, the Divine Office is a sacred pageant, inexhaustible in the variety and inspiration of the forms and subject matter it presents to his inspiration. More than that, it is a "school of the Lord's service" wherein his character as a monk and a Christian writer is formed: the psalms which are daily on his lips have imbued him with an awareness of God's majesty and omnipresence and with a sense of supernatural solidarity with the members of the Church. To the psalter he turns for simile and metaphor, and the cadences of scripture are reproduced in his verse.

### The Sacraments

Merton has given us poems on only two of the sacraments: Baptism and the Eucharist. Especially in the poems celebrating the real presence, his enthusiasm and intense lyricism is manifest. In "Song for the Blessed Sacrament"<sup>86</sup> he pictures Christ in the tabernacle as the Center around which the seasonal tableaux of Cistercian life are staged. The poem opens in the Lenten season of penance, and the compassion of the sacramental Christ makes fertile the "Repentant deserts of the mind." In summertime when the monks cultivate their crops, accompanied by the "native liturgy" of the singing birds, their spirits are joyous, and Christ smiles on them from "His sunny door."

The atmosphere, alive with light,  
And full of heaven, like an intellect,

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86 A Man in the Divided Sea, Merton, 80.

. Raises, before the faces of the burning hills,  
 (And with no hands but those of spirit and of miracle)  
 The glorious Christ, as light as grace,  
 And flies Him homeward to His Father's house.

Here again, although the images are largely subjective, the pervasive influence of the Savior, present among souls consecrated to Him throughout the seasonal presentation of the mysteries of redemption, is subtly suggested. The total concluding effect of the lyric is summed up in the tone of triumphant joy at the Ascension-victory.

In the same mood is "The Communion."<sup>87</sup> Here Merton expresses deep appreciation for the deliverance from gloom and sin's enslavement which is effected by the Eucharist. He uses a refrain: "O sweet escape! O smiling flight!" to intensify the mood of exultation and release. The setting of wheatfield and vineyard where the monks work in the summer remind Merton, as the seasonal rhythms always do, of the sacramental mercies. Nature for him is a holy thing, because God has made use of its products and elements to dispense His mercies to men. Always, for this poet so long held captive by the futile satisfactions of a hedonistic culture, the theme of liberation is emphasized. In undertaking to observe the rigid Cistercian discipline, he is more truly free than when he was at the mercy of his ill-regulated impulses. This seeming paradox intrigues the poet, and reflections on it constantly recur in his verses. Thus he writes: ". . . set us free to go to prison in this vineyard" and again, in succinct expression of the redemption wrought by the Eucharist:

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87 Ibid., 131.

"We'll rob Your vines and raid Your hills of wheat  
Until You lock us, Jesus, in Your jails of light."

The social character of Catholicism has impressed Merton deeply, and it was a prime factor in his conversion. He was interested in Communism as offering a possible solution to the manifest social injustices of our age, but the inconsistencies in the party-line deflected his early advances in this direction. After his conversion the work of Catholic social groups, particularly that of Friendship House, engaged his attention. He expresses his admiration for this work as well as his appreciation of its motivation in sacramental life in "Holy Communion: the City."<sup>88</sup> Here the contrast between the humility of the approach to the altar to receive the Blessed Sacrament and the fiery zeal it inspires is described in the lines:

What light will, in your eyes, like an archangel  
Soon stand armed,  
O you who come with looks more lowly than the dewy valleys  
And kneel like lepers on the step of Bethlehem?

The fruit of the Sacrament of the Eucharist for these Christian workers is peace and reassurance in union with the Savior. They accept gratefully this respite from their burden in His service, but ask as further consequences of the sacramental contact, the active, energetic charity that their apostolate requires. Here is their prayer:

O Glory, be not swift to vanish like the wine's slight savor,  
And still lie lightly, Truth upon our tongues,  
For graces moves, like the wind,  
The armies of the wheat, our secret hero!  
And faith sits in our hearts like fire,  
And makes them smile like suns,  
'While we come back from lovely Bethlehem  
To burn down Harlem with the glad word of Our Savior.'

The-adoration of the soul in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament exposed is Merton's theme in "The Holy Sacrament of the Altar."<sup>89</sup> He calls on the senses to be "more humble and more low," to content themselves with an attitude of joyous wakefulness. Here the intellect must bow in unquestioning faith, the only virtue which is of any avail in penetrating the mystery of the "Lamb Who bends all His brightness Low as our dim and puny lights . . . Who loves us so, He won't outshine our winking candles."

This poem is interesting for the devices of personification and parable which Merton employs to express the primacy of faith in the realm of Christian mystery. Absent from the feast of the Lamb are

Reason and knowledge (who) have bought oxen and they cannot come  
 Thrift and prudence give their own excuses,  
 And justice has a wife, and must stay home.  
 To the cold corners of the earth rise up, and go  
 Find the beggar Faith and bring him to the holy table.  
 He shall sit down among the good Apostles,  
 And weep with Peter at the washing of the feet.

His bread shall be the smiles of Pity's human face:  
 He'll eat and live with God, at least in longing, ever after:  
 His wine shall be the mortal blood of Mercy, Love and Peace:  
 And, having drunk, he'll hear the martyrs' joyful laughter.

The introduction of the martyrs into the closing tableau of Heaven is significant in its suggestions of the reward of the dark nights of the senses and of the soul, which must be undergone before the Christian, thoroughly detached and mortified by these painful experiences, merits to be in the company of those who have shed their blood like the Lamb.

"On the Anniversary of my Baptism"<sup>90</sup> is the record of Merton's

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89 Ibid., 146-147.

90 Merton, Figures for an Apocalypse, 38.

musings on the tremendous grace of his spiritual rebirth. Meditatively, he considers the material element of the sacrament, the cleansing waters, and by developing this metaphor, traces the growth of his Christian vocation. In retrospect the poet thinks of the many waters he has beheld in his life:

Certain waters are as blue as metal  
 Or as salt as sorrow.  
 Others wince like brass in the hammering sun,  
 Or stammer all over with tremors of shadow  
 That die as fast as the light winds  
 Whose flights surprise the promontories  
 And the marble bay.

He pictures again the "green Atlantic," which he so often crossed and which always returned him to the land, though it could so easily have "cracked our brittle shell And rifled all the cabins for their fruit of drunken passengers." From all eternity, however, God ordained otherwise:

The day You made the waters,  
 And dragged them down from the dividing islands  
 And made them spring with fish  
 You planned to bless the brine out of the seas  
 That were to be my death.

And this is the ninth November since my world's end  
 and my genesis  
 When, with the sting of salt in my dry mouth  
 Cross-crowned with water by the priest,  
 Stunned at the execution of my old companion, death,  
 And with the murder of my savage history  
 You drowned me in the shallow font.

Elsewhere in a short prose account of his conversion, Merton voices his realization that Baptism is only a wondrous beginning of the Christian life:

I came to the font seeking what most people seek - faith, truth, life, peace. I found all that the first day, and yet I have continued to seek and have continued also to find. This seeking and finding goes on more and more. The pursuit becomes more ardent and more calm. The

experience of discovery is something deeper and more vital every day.<sup>91</sup>

Merton's poetic expression of this wonderment is more vital and convincing:

My eyes, swimming in unexpected infancy  
 Were far too frail for such a favor:  
 They still close-kept the stone shell of their empty sepulchre:  
 But though they saw none, guessed the new-come Trinity  
 That charged my sinews with His secret life.

The poet, then conceives the Sacraments as intimately related to life. He is never interested in mere ritual and pageantry for its own sake. The Holy Eucharist is a font of holy joy to the receiver; it frees him progressively from the bondage of sin and invests his days with an aura of sanctity. It is an intimate, absorbing contact between the soul and Christ, but this Christ is the Head of many members, and reception of the Sacrament conditions the Christian's relationship with his brothers in Christ. Social injustice, especially, concerns the receiver of the Blessed Sacrament, who must suffer with those who suffer as well as rejoice with those who rejoice. Baptism is death to sin and birth to a new life as temple of the Trinity. It is an initiation and a beginning. In these reflections on the sacramental system, Merton again illustrates his preoccupation with the wonder of Christian doctrine. He is never content with the record of an emotional experience; always the intellectual illumination is paramount.

### The Mystical Body of Christ

Basic to a true understanding of the Church's liturgy is the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ. Pope Pius XII introduces his encyclical

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91 O'Brien, 240.

On the Sacred Liturgy with an explanation of this dogma of the vital unity of all the members of Christ through the gift of sanctifying grace. The liturgy is the prayer of the Mystical Body; it is Christ glorifying His Father and nourishing His brethren through the Mass, the Divine Office, the sacraments. Merton's appreciation of this doctrine is the foundation of his spiritual writing and the theme of much of his religious poetry. When he was asked to write an account of his conversion for an anthology of similar sketches, he did not content himself with outlining the external circumstances which were actual graces leading to his Baptism. Rather, he emphasized the significance and spiritual consequences of initiation into the Mystical Body of Christ. He can only understand conversion "in the light of the Parousia--the second coming of Christ--and of the Pleroma--the fullness of the Mystical Christ."<sup>92</sup> He has a vivid realization of the oneness of all Christians in Christ the Head, and of the Church as Christ's Body, whose function is to glorify the Father. "The whole Christ," he explains,

is constantly growing and advancing toward that 'day of Christ Jesus,' the day of the perfecting of the saints, when the Body will be complete, when the number of the elect will be filled up, and we will all 'meet unto the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the age of the fullness of Christ.'<sup>93</sup>

This final perfection, he realizes, depends in some measure upon each Christian's use of grace for the good of the whole Body. The more fully one enters into his Christian life, the more urgent becomes his need to communicate grace to others by prayer, sacrifice and good works. Each individual

<sup>92</sup> O'Brien, 237.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 238.



member of Christ is called by God to do this in the manner ordained by His providence, and all the events and circumstances of one's life are sent as means of developing Christ's life in oneself and diffusing it to others.

In testimony of the quality of expectancy for the glory to come, of desire for the triumph of the whole Christ in the Parousia, is the poem "How Long We Wait."<sup>94</sup> The lyric is characterized by the strength of its quiet longing, exemplified in these verses:

Heaven, when will we hear you sing?  
O earth, when will you wake in the green wheat  
And all our Trappist cedars sing:  
'Bright land, lift up your leafy gates!  
You abbey steeples, sing with bells!  
For look, our Sun rejoices like a dancer  
On the rim of our hills.'

The last lines are lovely with confidence: "In the blue west the moon is uttered like the word: 'Farewell.'"

The same theme is developed in another mood in the title poem to Figures for an Apocalypse<sup>95</sup> Here the tone is lovingly imperative, and the cry of the universe "groaning in expectancy of the redemption to come" will not be gainsaid:

Come down, come down, Beloved  
And make the brazen waters burn beneath Thy feet.

There is haste and urgency in the exhortation to make the most of time, to flee unprofitable occupations - particularly in the third section of the poem, dramatically entitled: "Advice to My Friends Robert Lax and Edward Rice,

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<sup>94</sup> Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 53.

<sup>95</sup> Merton, Figures for an Apocalypse, 13.

to Get Away While They Still Can":

It is the hour to fly without passports  
 From Juda to the mountains  
 And hide while citizens turn to butter  
 For fear of the secret bomb.  
 We'll arm for our own invisible battle  
 In the wells of the pathless wood  
 Wounding our limbs with prayers and lent  
 Shooting the traitor memory  
 And throwing away our guns  
 And learning to fight like Gedeon's men  
 Hiding our lights in jugs.

Merton excoriates the barren women, "thin, unprofitable queens," of our generation, and the false prophets of science and progress. He draws an unforgettable picture of the downfall of New York:

This was a city  
 That dressed herself in paper money,  
 She lived four hundred years  
 With nickels running in her veins.  
 She loved the waters of the seven purple seas,  
 And burned on her own green harbor  
 Higher and whiter than ever any Tyre.  
 She was as callous as a taxi:  
 Her high-heeled eyes were sometimes blue as gin.  
 And she nailed them, all the days of her life  
 Through the hearts of her six million poor.  
 Now she has died in the terrors of a sudden contemplation  
 Drowned in the waters of her own, her poisoned well.

There is noticeable here especially the use of modern colloquial idiom which Merton effectively employs in certain appropriate contexts.

But the terrors of the end will be mitigated for the elect. The new Jerusalem, eternal abode of the Blessed, will be seen in the heavens, and in poetic vision Merton beholds the City,

sailing down from God  
 Dressed in the glory of the Trinity, and angel-crowned  
 In nine white diadems of liturgy.

Developed in these two poems, therefore, we have the glorious consummation of the Christian life depicted: the Parousia and the Pleroma to which Merton looks forward with prophetic desire and with an imminence of expectation which reflects the minds of the earliest Christians.

Meanwhile, however, the Body of Christ reproduces the beauty and virtue of its Head only with struggle and difficulty in a world that is hostile to its supernatural outlook and spiritual aspirations. Each of Our Lord's members must laboriously conquer whatever in himself impedes the progress of the Divine Life he tabernacles. The record of Merton's own combat is recorded in the verses of "The Biography."<sup>96</sup> In this poem he acknowledges his personal share in the sufferings and death of Christ for his sins:

Lance and thorn, and scourge and nail  
Have more than made His flesh my chronicle,  
My journeys more than bite His bleeding feet.

Almost obtrusively evident is the echo of Francis Thompson's Hound of Heaven in the theme of flight from Christ:

You were my France and England  
My seas and my America:  
You were my life and air, and yet I would not own You.

The Passion of Christ has merited His members' redemption, however, and after the soul surrenders to his Lord, a mystical sharing in the divine life takes place -- a Christening -- so that with theological accuracy Merton can say:

Where, on what cross my agony will come  
I do not ask You:  
For it is written and accomplished here  
On every crucifix and every altar.  
It is my narrative that drowns and is forgotten

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<sup>96</sup> Merton, *A Man in the Divided Sea*, 72.

- In Your five open Jordans,  
Your voice that cries my: 'Consummatum est.'

The subject matter of "The Biography" is given different treatment in "An Argument -- of the Passion of Christ,"<sup>97</sup> one of the few Merton poems developed in regular rhythm and rhyme scheme. The innate depravity of human nature unredeemed and vitiated by the Fall, yet atoned for by the sacrifice of the Lamb of God is strikingly expressed in these verses:

The worm that watched within the womb  
Was standing guard at Jesus' tomb,  
And my first angry, infant breath  
Stood wakeful, lest He rise from death.  
My adolescence, like the wolf,  
Fled to the edges of the gulf  
And searched the ruins of the night  
To hide from Calvary's iron light:  
But in the burning jaws of day  
I saw the barren Judas Tree;  
For, to the caverns of my pride  
Judas had come, and there was paid!

Then again, there is the thought of Christ's agonized payment for each man's personal sin, but the conclusion is not calmly exalted and hopeful as is so in most of Merton's work. Rather, there is the frustrating realization that for many, intent on their own willfulness, the passion will prove ineffectual:

There is no ear that has not heard  
The deathless cry of murdered God:  
No eye that has not looked upon  
The lance of Crucifixion:  
And yet that cry beats at the ears  
Of old, deaf-mute interpreters,  
Whose querulous and feeble cries  
Drown stronger voices, and whose eyes

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97 Ibid., 149.

- Will let no light of lances in:  
They still will clamor for a sign!

This is the agony of another Christ as He looks out over today's Jerusalem, sick at the heedlessness of those he loves. His grief is made yet more poignant by the knowledge that, too short a time before, he was one of their number.

The spiritual enrichment afforded Merton by his grasp of the doctrine of the Mystical Body is further illustrated by what is, perhaps, his best known poem: "For My Brother." It is an elegy written to the memory of John Paul, killed in World War II, and describes Merton's grief and sense of loss as well as the spiritual sublimation of his sorrow. The poem is written in the form of an apostrophe to John Paul after his decease. Merton speaks to his dearly-loved younger brother, assuring him that the sorrow and desolation he feels in his loss will be offered as a sacrifice to God to relieve the former's sufferings in Purgatory. The poet interrupts this promise to ask in anguish: "Where does your body lie? Then he restates the theme, offering himself and all that he does for his brother's relief. Finally, he points out the brother's oneness in Christ and assures John Paul that the compassion of the God-man will plead for him and be the price of his admission into heaven:

Sweet brother, if I do not sleep  
My eyes are flowers for your tomb;  
And if I cannot eat my bread,  
My fasts shall live like willows where you died,  
If in the heat I find no water for my thirst,  
My thirst shall turn to springs for you, poor traveller.

Here in effective metaphor, the supernatural unity of the brothers, which far

transcends their common parentage, is convincingly illustrated. Later in the poem the same truth is reiterated:

Come, in my labor find a resting place  
And in my sorrows lay your head,  
Or rather take my life and blood  
And buy yourself a better bed --  
Or take my breath and take my death  
And buy yourself a better rest.

Christ, too, identifies Himself with His members, and in them suffers and dies until the end of time. Thus their human acts, supernaturalized, have value, and fill up what is wanting to the sufferings of Christ for the world's redemption: the voluntary life offering of all His members. In these lines he expresses this idea:

. . . Your cross and mine shall tell men still  
Christ died on each for both of us.  
For in the wreckage of your April Christ lies slain  
And Christ weeps in the ruins of my spring:

The emotional quality of this poem is intense and sincere, the expression is artistic and appropriate, striking metaphors and images abound, and the rich thought structure is logically developed. Several critics have singled it out for special praise. In it the poet speaks to his brother tenderly, at the height of his grief, offering himself as a living victim in union with Christ that he may buy for John Paul the happiness of eternal rest.

One Christian truth that seems to fascinate Merton is the timelessness of the Christian mysteries. Marmion has compared this perpetual efficacy of the historical events of Jesus's life to the touching of His garment by the woman troubled with the issue of blood. Virtue went out from Him.<sup>98</sup> So also when the members of Christ contemplate with faith and love some event of His

<sup>98</sup> Dom Columba Marmion, Christ in His Mysteries, St. Louis, 1924, 24.

life on earth; virtue again goes forth, and the fruits of that action of the Man-God are applied to their souls. As one authority avers:

The mysteries of Our Saviour, beyond their absolute value and significance, that is, the value of these mysteries in themselves, in their historical reality and in their subject, Jesus Christ, have a value and significance in relation to ourselves, members of Christ.<sup>99</sup>

This is not merely because Christ is the model of His members in these mysteries, nor even because He lived them for their benefit, but because in His mysteries Christ makes but one with us. The Father chose Christ as the first-born of many brethren; He "saw us with His Son in each of the mysteries lived by Christ, and because Christ accomplished them as Chief of the Church."<sup>100</sup> Merton, therefore, in the consideration of any event in Christ's life treats it as having consequences for Catholics of this modern era; more than that—he contemporizes the historical scene. Thus in "Cana,"<sup>101</sup> the significance of the miracle is told in the first person plural, and the water changed to wine is a symbol of the divine life:

Wine for the ones who bended to the dirty earth,  
Have feared, since lovely Eden, the sun's fire,  
Yet hardly mumble in their dusty mouths, one prayer.

Wine for old Adam digging in the briars!

All men, potential members of Christ, are "earthen vessels, waiting empty" to be filled with the fullness of God, and the bestowal of the gift is foreshadowed by Cana's miracle.

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<sup>99</sup> John J. Burke, C.S.P., The Doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ, N.Y., 1931, 19.

<sup>100</sup> Marmion, 14.

<sup>101</sup> Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 57.

"The Widow of Nain"<sup>102</sup> pictures the meeting of the funeral bearers of the dead son with the Apostles, "men with hands as hard as rope, (Some smell of harvests, some of nets) the strangers." The Apostles invite the members of the cortege "men with eyes like winters . . . and cold faces clean as cliffs" to lay down their burden "and learn a wonder from the Christ." Then in a parenthesis the poet interprets the comment of the modern when he declares:

Oh, you will say that those old times  
Are all dried up like water  
Since the great God went walking on a road to Nain.

The widow's son died again, and the men of the town are dust. But the pall bearers take up the thread of the narrative once more to comment on the miracle and to answer the question implied. The raising of the widow's son, they realize, was granted

That we may read the Cross and Easter in this rising  
And learn the endless heaven  
Promised to all the widow-Church's risen children.

The miracles of the God-man were worked for all men; they are living sources of grace to all who meditate on them with faith and who participate in their liturgical re-enactment.

The timelessness and the eternal present of the life of Christ is brought to dramatic realization again in Merton's poem "The Betrayal."<sup>103</sup> Here every man's share in the betrayal and in Deicide is sharply underlined in the poignant "we" which brings the poet and his contemporaries into the

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102 Ibid., 58.

103 Ibid., 75.



passion scenes: Envy, pride of life, and inordinate love of the world's richness intensified the sufferings of the Redeemer, and His agony will last while a potential Judas lives on earth. Yet, now as then, Christ retaliates with more outpourings of generous love:

You died and paid Your traitors with a prayer  
 And cured our swearing darkness with Your wounds' five lights  
 Eyes see Your holy hands, and, in them, flowers.  
 You let the doubter's finger feel the sun in Your side.  
 Ears have Your words and tongues believe You wheat:  
 You feed with life the lips that kissed You dead!

The triumph of the fullness of Christian life and its consequences for the whole Church, made splendid by the lives of its saintly sons, is advanced with quiet peace in "The Trappist Cemetery -- Gethsemane."<sup>104</sup> This is a meditation of the great ultimates of human existence; it is marked by the sense of communion that is the fruit of conscious membership in the Body of Christ.

It is evening in the Cistercian cemetery, and the "sun exulting like a dying martyr Canonizes with his splendid fire, the sombre hills." Everything is quiet, and the car that speeds past "with roar and radio" serves to accentuate the silence. Evening descends, and the night noises of the country-side accompany the prayer of the wakeful monks, who pray to their forbears in glory:

Teach us, Cistercian Fathers, how to wear  
 Silence, our humble armor.  
 Pray us a torrent of the seven spirits

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 89.

- That are our wine and stamina.  
Because your work is not yet done.

For the poet "every burning morning is a prophecy of Christ coming to raise and vindicate even our sorry flesh." He looks forward with exultation to the day of the Pleroma, when the Bodies of these holy dead shall rise to be glorified when they shall see

Creation rise again like gold  
Clean, from the furnace of your litanies.  
The beasts and trees shall share your resurrection  
And a new world be born from these green tombs.

Echoing this theme of triumph is "The Victory."<sup>105</sup> The Christian paradox of life from death, the song of the martyrs is here expounded. St. Ignatius of Antioch rejoiced at the prospect of being ground by the teeth of lions into Christ's pure bread; so every one of His members must praise God in suffering, knowing that the grain of wheat must die before it can bring forth fruit. Whether death in Christ means a firing squad, imprisonment or simply the slow, daily sacrifice of a silent, mortified life, it can be offered with gladness and mindfulness of the assured victory to come. All of the Church militant, therefore, are exhorted to

Make ready for the Christ, Whose smile, like lightning,  
Sets free the song of everlasting glory,  
That now sleeps in your paper flesh, like dynamite.

The consideration of eschatology is a characteristic of Merton. He has stated emphatically: "Every Christian should regard his Christian life in relation to the Parousia and to the Pleroma -- the final fulfillment of the life

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105 Ibid., 86.

of the whole Christ,"<sup>106</sup> and this conviction re-echoes in his poetry.

"Aubade - Harlem"<sup>107</sup> plumbs the richness of the Mystical Body doctrine in another direction. It portrays the social consciousness inspired by a realization of the union of Christ with His members, the Harlem negroes.

Here is Merton's picture of their ugly tenements:

Across the cages of the keyless aviaries  
The lines and wires, the gallows of the broken kites  
Crucify against the fearful light  
The ragged dresses of the little children.

In "whiter buildings," however:

The white man's wives, like Pilate's  
Cry in the peril of their frozen dreams:  
Daylight has driven iron spikes  
Into the flesh of Jesus' hands and feet . . .  
Four flowers of blood have nailed Him to the walls of Harlem.

But the warning of the dream goes unheeded:

Along the white walls of the clinics and the hospitals  
Pilate vanishes with a cry:  
They have cut down two hundred Judases  
Hanged by the neck in the opera houses and museums.

This is an angry poem: an indictment and a sentence, with no comfort for the sinned-against nor solution for their ills. Merton had determined to join the Friendship House staff permanently. He had great admiration for the Baroness de Hueck and her work in Harlem, and he remarks in The Seven Storey Mountain that it was immediately following a retreat for the workers at this Catholic Action center before beginning his career for Christian social justice, that he became convinced of his Trappist vocation. Merton had had a

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106 O'Brien, 239.

107 Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 42.

sporadic registration in a student communist cell, because he considered Communism as a possible solution to the social ills of which he was so cognizant. As a convert, therefore, he was particularly receptive to Catholic movements of a social nature. An address of the Baroness de Hueck, given at St. Bonaventure's College where he was a faculty member, moved him deeply. He summarized it thus:

For, she said, if Catholics were able to see Harlem, as they ought to see it, with the eyes of faith, they would not be able to stay away from such a place. Hundreds of priests and lay-people would give up everything to go there and try to do something to relieve the tremendous misery, the poverty, sickness, degradation and dereliction of a race that was being crushed and perverted morally and physically, under the burden of a colossal economic injustice. Instead of seeing Christ suffering in His members, and instead of going to help him, Who said: 'Whatsoever you did to the least of these My brethren, you did it to me,' we preferred our own comfort: we averted our eyes from such a spectacle, because it made us uneasy: the thought of so much dirt nauseated us -- and we never stopped to think that we, perhaps, might be partly responsible for it. And so people continued to die of starvation and disease in those evil tenements full of vice and cruelty, while those who did condescend to consider their problems held banquets in the big hotels downtown to discuss the 'Race Situation' in a big, rosy cloud of hot air.<sup>108</sup>

In the face of a youthful ardor inflamed by such sentiments as these, Merton's entrance into Gethsemane seems difficult to understand, and it is to his poetry that one must turn for explanation. In "Three Postcards from the Monastery"<sup>109</sup> there is transcendent assurance of the fruitfulness of the quiet, secluded Cistercian life in overcoming the world's ills. Merton has not retreated to the idyllic fastnesses of an ivory tower, remote from earthly concerns; rather, he sees in the Trappist regime an opportunity for closer

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108 Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, 341.

109 Merton, Figures for an Apocalypse, 35.

union with Christ, in His Victimhood for the men He came to redeem. The poem is impressionistic, but the theme is clear: "We have gone up to buy you, Andromeda." This purposive retreat implies renunciation:

We have refused the reward,  
We have abandoned the man-hunt.  
But when the contest is over  
We shall inherit the world.

The same thought of fruitful withdrawal from the world's concerns is repeated in "A Mysterious Song in the Spring of the Year:"<sup>110</sup>

Oh happy death, where life and fright  
Where love and loss are drawn apart  
And stand, forever separate,  
While one by one the fragments of a century  
Disintegrate and fall in silence all about us:  
And these are news of peace, but not dismay.

For heaven is builded deeper and stronger everywhere  
From the collapse of our neglected history.

It was his strong consciousness of the implications of membership in the Body of Christ that attracted Merton to a life of contemplation rather than one of active service in the social missions of the Church. He had learned from the Gospel and from the life of Christ the redemptive effectiveness of the hidden life.

In summation of this section, then, it will suffice to recall the comprehensiveness with which Merton treats the doctrine of the Mystical Body, the concept of the whole Christ, Head and members, growing up to the fullness pre-ordained by the providence of God. Christ walks the earth today in a second humanity taken from His adopted brothers. He lives and grows, suffers

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 42.

and dies in every baptized person, and the Father, with Whom there is no past nor future, but only "now," beholds with infinite complacency His Divine Son, one with all those who live spiritually by His grace. This is the truth whose many facets Merton has explored poetically: he has recorded his personal struggle to surrender to the demands of grace; his own contribution to the passion through sin; his oneness with the departed by the bond of common divine life; the perennial fruitfulness of the historical mysteries of Jesus; the social consequences of oneness with Christ, with regard to the demands of justice and practical charity; and, finally, his strong consciousness that he must yield himself as another Christ in sacrifice for his brethren.

#### The Sacramental Universe

It is necessary to look to the mystery of the Incarnation to account for the Christian concept of the universe as a sacrament.<sup>111</sup> According to the account in Genesis, God beheld the beauty of the material universe, fresh from His creative hand, and "saw that it was good." Then He made man in His own image, to be the crown and ruler of that creation, its most perfect product, the link between matter and the spirit world. When Christ took on human nature, however, the universe became sanctified and consecrated. "All corporeal being leaped into a new dignity of existence by the birth of one Child."<sup>112</sup> Accordingly, in the liturgy and particularly in the Benedic-

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<sup>111</sup> Joseph McDonald, "The Universe as a Sacrament," Orate Fratres, XII, 201, March, 1938.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

ite Canticle and the Laudate psalms at Lauds, the exultation of the material world is expressed through man's praise. This explains the reverence of the saints for the universe. Suffice it to indicate St. Benedict's admonition to his disciples to handle even the kitchen utensils as consecrated vessels of the altar,<sup>113</sup> and St. Francis's care for the animal kingdom. As one theologian has explained this idea:

The world is the environment of Christ's Mystical Body. Nothing else that is corporeal approaches this body in dignity and consequently everything corporeal is destined to serve its needs. The need of the Mystical Body is to live the life of Christ, its form; and therefore the corporeal world has become the consecrated instrument or means to this end: it is the cathedral of the Mystical Body.<sup>114</sup>

The Cistercians are farmers, and the beauties of nature, supernaturalized by the realization of its dignity in Christ, serve as stimuli for the exercise of Merton's poetic gift. Thus is the joyous lyric "Spring: Monastery Farm"<sup>115</sup> he exults in the huge bulls" who "sing like trains," in the white orchards, the trees, the boom" of honey-bees and the "blue-eyed streams." Like Hopkins, however, he never stops at externals, discerning "with the secret eye of faith" Him Who is "under the world's splendor and Wonder."<sup>116</sup>

For, in the sap and music of the region's spring  
We hear the picture of Your voice, Creator,  
And in our heartspeace answer You  
And offer You the world.

Moreover, this poem witnesses Merton's realization of man as nature's priest,

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113 Holy Rule, XXXI.

114 McDonald, 202.

115 Merton, Figures for an Apocalypse, 56.

116 Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The Wreck of the Deutschland."

offering in his capacity as lord of the world, that praise due to the Creator for the excellencies of the things He has made. Only through man can creation render homage: "Our songs complete those deep, uncomprehending choirs." Thus man lends the heat and frost, trees and forests, mountains and hills his voice to praise their Maker. In turn, for him, nature "is made our glory and our Sacrament As every golden instant mints the Christ Who keeps us free."

This closing thought of nature's revelation of God is the theme of "Trappists Working."<sup>117</sup> The monks are felling trees in the forest, and the poet prays:

Walk to us, Jesus, through the walls of trees,  
And find us still adorers in these airy churches,  
Singing our other office with our saws and axes.

In long, slow cadences which suggest "The Fall of Night"<sup>118</sup> which he celebrates, Merton sees at sunset reminders of Christ and redemption in all of nature. The heavily-laden harvest wagons are loaded with hay to make a bed for "Mercy, born between the animals." The blossoming apple tree is Jesse's rod and the August apples, red as blood, recall the fruit of Eden. In a line perhaps too obviously imitative of Hopkins Merton sees in the star-filled sky an image of heaven populated by the angels and saints - "the hallows, crowding to their window sills." Then darkness falls, and "The rivers hide because their eyes are wet."

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<sup>117</sup> Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 61.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 70.



Again in "Landscape: Wheatfields,"<sup>119</sup> the overflowing wagons are reminders of the last accounting, the return home from life's work, merit-laden, for

Our days slide evenly toward the term of all our liturgy,  
And all our weeks are after Pentecost.

The Queen of Heaven is invoked ardently in words filled with desire:

Oh, pray us full of marrow, Queen of Heaven,  
For those mills, His truth, our glory!  
Crown us with alleluias on that day of fight . . .  
Oh, pray us, Lady, full of faith and graces,  
Arm us with fruits against that contest and comparison,  
Arm us with ripeness for the wagons of our Christ.

Again in "Two States of Prayer"<sup>120</sup> Merton shows how varied moods mirror the spiritual states of the soul. In "wild October" when the woods are aflame with color, "our hearts take flame And burn us down on pyres of prayer with too much glory." Then the leaves fall, and bleak November winds bully the stripped trees, while sorrow and penitence possess the spirit. In December "the landscape, like a white Cistercian Puts on the ample winter like a cowl." The member of Christ is at peace in the beauty of a snow-blanketed world.

In "Winter Afternoon"<sup>121</sup> other moods induced by the season are described. The winds which storm the forest set the black cedars bowing and sighing, "waking the deep wood's muffled antiphons." The majesty of the storm awakes a prophetic strain and, startled, the poet exclaims:

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119 Merton, Figures for an Apocalypse, 29.

120 Ibid., 31.

121 Ibid., 80.

We thought we heard John Baptist or Elias, there, on the dark hill  
Or else the angel with the trumpet of the Judgment.

Occasionally, however, the soul outstrips the slow seasons and is carried in prayer to a state of spiritual joy not indicated by nature or the liturgy. Thus in "Evening: Zero Weather"<sup>122</sup>

All the monks come in with eyes as clean as the cold sky  
And axes under their arms,  
Still paying out Ave Marias  
With rosaries between their bleeding fingers.

But when they go to Vespers "lean and whipped," hiding "in cowls as deep as clouds," suddenly

We have found Christ, our August  
Here in the zero days before Lent -  
We are already binding up our sheaves of harvest  
Beating the lazy liturgy, going up with exultation  
Upon the eve of our Ash Wednesday,  
And entering our blazing heaven by the doors of the Assumption!

In June the spectacle of a fruitful earth and early harvest inspires in "The Transformation: For the Feast of the Sacred Heart"<sup>123</sup> this consideration:

Lord, in this splendid season  
When all things that grow extend their arms  
And show the world Your love,

Shall the free wills of man alone  
Bide in their January ice  
And keep the stubborn winter of their fruitlessness?

This piece is obviously a meditative reflection on the significance of the feast, complete even with colloquy and resolutions, so that it cannot be evi-

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122 Ibid., 63.

123 Ibid., 65.

denced as an example of true poetic inspiration. It does, however, add one more poem to the many occurring in Merton's works which underline his consciousness of the symbolism of the seasons. "The Sowing of Meanings"<sup>124</sup> develops this concept also. According to St. Paul, all nature awaits with eagerness the manifestation of the last day when there will be "a new heaven and a new earth":

Creation with eager straining awaiteth the manifestation of the children of God. For creation was made subject to vanity - not of its own will, but by reason of him who subjected it - yet with hope that creation itself shall be freed from its slavery to corruption unto the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that all creation doth groan and travail together to this hour.<sup>125</sup>

This quality of expectancy in the poem is expressed as follows:

The quiet air awaits one note,  
One light, one ray and it will be the angels' spring:  
One flash, one glance upon the shiny pond, and then  
Asperges me! sweet wilderness, and lo! we are redeemed!  
For like a grain of fire  
Smouldering in the heart of every living essence  
God plants His undivided power ---  
Buries His thought too vast for worlds  
In seed and root and blade and flower.

In "Song: Contemplation"<sup>126</sup> this consciousness of nature revealing the Creator through symbol attains to ecstasy. "O Land alive with miracles," the poem begins, and continues to enumerate the myriad reminders of God in a common countryside: "Christ and angels walk among us everywhere." At times this realization prepares the soul for more ineffable favors than mere awareness of the divine:

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124 Ibid., 84.

125 Romans 8:19-22

126 Ibid., 40.

. . . in the dazzled, high and unelectric air  
 Seized in the talons of the terrible Dove,  
 The huge, unwounding Spirit,  
 We suddenly escape the drag of earth  
 Fly from the dizzy paw of gravity  
 And swimming in the wind that lies beyond the track  
 Of thought and genius and of desire,

Trample the white, appalling stratosphere . . .

Merton is unique in his ability to communicate some perception of the higher states of prayer by his striking figures. Nature's loveliness arrests him with its myriad reminders of the Creator's beauty.

The purpose of this chapter has been to demonstrate by analysis of contents and number of examples the predominance of liturgical inspiration in the poetry of Thomas Merton. Participation in the Church's worship has been, by his own admission, the principal formative influence in his spiritual development, as well as the inspiration of a large percentage of his best poetry.

In his essay "Poetry and the Contemplative Life," he has pointed out:

Now, whether we speak of contemplation as active or passive, one thing is evident: it brings us into the closest contact with the one subject matter truly worthy of a Christian poet: God as He is seen by faith in revelation, or in the intimate experience of the soul illumined by the gifts of the Holy Ghost. Consider, for instance, what a tremendous mine of literary inspiration is in the liturgical life.<sup>127</sup>

Merton is still plumbing the inexhaustible riches of that mine.

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127 Thomas Merton, "Poetry and the Contemplative Life," 97.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE LITURGY AS A FORMATIVE FACTOR IN MERTON'S ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT

The extent of Thomas Merton's dependence on the liturgy for subject-matter has been explored in the previous chapter. There is one other factor which remains to be considered; namely, the formative power of liturgical participation in Merton's development as a Christian artist. For him the liturgy constitutes an environment; it is the source of his esthetic satisfaction and the preoccupation of his monastic life.

In his study entitled *Liturgy and Personality*,<sup>128</sup> the eminent philosopher and lay theologian, Dietrich von Hildebrand has undertaken to describe the characteristics which enlightened liturgical participation engenders. Among these he lists a spirit of objectivity, a sense of communion, of continuity, of discretio and of reverence. It is proposed to examine Merton's poetic output to discover evidences of these qualities. Von Hildebrand's development is followed closely as the basis of this chapter, and the qualities he enumerates are illustrated from Merton's verses.

One of the essential characteristics of the liturgy is the predominance of the Logos over Ethos, of Knowledge over Will, of Truth over Goodness which influences the spirituality of the individual formed by it. For the

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128 Dietrich von Hildebrand, Liturgy and Personality, N.Y., 1943.

lover of the liturgy, eternity swallows up time and the things of earth; he is concerned with ultimates. He sees the universe bathed in the redemptive blood of the Lamb, men are actually or potentially the adopted sons of God, and he sighs above all for the triumph and consummation of the Parousia. His life is an extension of the Gloria Patri; all his love and desire are for the coming fullness of Christ, and all his hatred for whatever of the forces of evil or the perversion of man impedes it. As Von Hildebrand expresses it:

The classical man is preoccupied with genuine problems: He acknowledges the danger of sin, realizes his need of salvation, knows the weakness and frailty of his nature, is filled with the longing for truth, communion, love, feels the insufficiency of that which is created, aspires to the absolute, and is restless until he rests in God.<sup>129</sup>

Perhaps the most vivid illustration of this spirit of classicism in Merton is afforded by the title poem to Figures for an Apocalypse<sup>130</sup> wherein he begs with characteristic urgency:

Come down, come down, Beloved,  
And make the brasen waters burn beneath Thy feet.

Surely there is pathos and understanding of his generation in the penetrating analysis of these lines:

For from the beginning of the world,  
How few of us have heard the silver of Thy creed  
Or paid our hearts for hours of emptiness  
With gold of Thy belief?

And there is the terrible realization of sterility in the plaint of the "rich women . . . thin, unprofitable queens":

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>130</sup> Merton, Figures for an Apocalypse, 13.

We have stood in the late light of the most lonely afternoons  
And counted all the hours that accused us  
Cutting to the division of the marrow and the spine.

But realization of their poverty is not enough in the awful hour of the Parousia: "For the vintage is at an end The gathering shall come no more." The false prophet of the materialistic world has promised:

Tomorrow is the millenium, the golden age!  
The human race will wake up  
And find dollars growing out of the palms of their hands  
And the whole world will die of brotherly love  
Because the factories jig like drums  
And furnaces feed themselves  
And all men lie in idleness upon the quilted pastures  
Tuning their friendly radios and dreaming in the sun.

Those who have listened to these seductive pledges and who have given themselves over to a heedless, sensual life, oblivious of others' needs are all confounded and their lying leader comes to a fearful end:

At the edge of the salt-lands  
In the dry blue clay  
The wild dog with a red claw scuffs out a little hollow  
Burying the prophet's meatless shin.

There is frightening realism in his metaphorical word-picture of New York:

A city that dressed herself in paper money . . .  
. . . Callous as a taxi;  
Her high-heeled eyes were sometimes blue as gin  
And she nailed them, all the days of her life  
Through the hearts of her six million poor.

But in God's good time the city will be levelled:

The steel circle of time, inexorable,  
Bites like a padlock shut, forever . . .  
And in that trap the murderers and sorcerers and crooked leaders  
Go rolling home to hell  
And history is done.

Then we hear the words of an expectant lover, exultant in the prophetic vision

of the City, the new Jerusalem

. . . sailing down from God  
Dressed in the glory of the Trinity, and angel-crowned  
In nine white diadems of liturgy.

This is the poetry of one whose prayer life is nourished on the psalms of David. There is the same indignation at man's defection from God; the same confidence that His outraged glory will be vindicated; the same sustaining hope in the beauty of the City of God grown up to its fullness.

Another facet of personality developed by the liturgy is the spirit of communion. The Christian prays to God as a member of the Church in an act of community worship. It is principally this which distinguishes his spiritual outlook from the highly individualistic concepts of protestantism. Moreover, "Each man, even when praying alone, enters consciously, if he understands this prayer, into the wider stream of prayer; he takes part in the prayer of the Head and through Him also of the Mystical Body of Christ."<sup>131</sup> This consciousness of communion with many brethren is not only a characteristic of liturgical prayer, but it is powerfully engendered by it. Contact with any value transforms and ennobles man by lifting him out of himself and his own petty interests in a free and unhindered response to truth, beauty or goodness. The liturgy, containing superabundantly all of these ultimate values, is a school of selflessness, where each participant is raised with his brothers of the supernatural life to the contemplation of God. His prayer becomes no longer "I" but "we and ours," for "God, the deepest theme of each of us, the highest Good, is at the same time the most general theme, of which we cannot be absolutely

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131 Von Hildebrand, 42.



conscious unless we are also conscious of our ultimate deepest communion with all men."<sup>132</sup>

From this fact of its being social prayer, certain other qualities of the liturgy result. Personal subjective reactions and emotional responses are not found in the Church's prayer. It is, on the contrary, "supra-individual" and of necessity, since the emotional states vary, and the devout outpourings of one individual, even of a great Saint, cannot be imposed on all. Dogma is the staple of liturgical prayer as a consequence, and a classic restraint distinguishes its manner of expression. This is not, however, to say that the liturgy is devoid of emotion as another liturgist affirms:

Nobly proportioned and monumental, it is at the same time full of fervor and inspiration. There is nothing trivial or confining about it. Its viewpoint is communal; it embraces the whole of human society. And yet it does not slight the individual, but rather enriches each one through membership in a great organism in which every personal need is satisfied and every personal feeling is gratified. The liturgy transcends the little things of earth; and yet it neglects no detail of human life. Its prayer and chant are overshadowed by the glory and majesty of the everlasting. It treasures at its heart that intense love of Christ, that holy mysticism, that spirit of self-sacrifice, which are characteristic of the Church of the martyrs.<sup>133</sup>

Certainly, it should be possible to find in the work of a poet who avers that his principal source of inspiration is the official worship of the Church, these qualities of Christian social consciousness, doctrinal content and emotional restraint which it engenders. As one indication that this is indeed so, very few of the poems of liturgical inspiration which have been treated in this thesis are directly personal or autobiographical, and in the

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<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>133</sup> Herwegen, IV.

few which are, "On the Anniversary of My Baptism," "The Biography" and "For My Brother," the consciousness of the reality of grace, life-bond of the Mystical Body, is dominant. For Merton the Christian is not merely an individual striving in imitation of his leader, to achieve personal perfection and union with God; rather, he is another Christ who lives, suffers and dies in the twentieth century for the redemption of his contemporaries; his individual actions have social consequences. Baptism is a "genesis," a deliverance from the empty sepulchre of isolation so that henceforth his fasts, sorrows and labors offered in union with Christ can "buy" forgiveness for his many brothers through the supernatural life as well as for his own brother in the flesh.

Not only in the poems which have some facet of the doctrine of the Mystical Body for a theme, but throughout his poetry on liturgical subjects, the consciousness of the Christian community is present in Merton's writings. Thus in "The Peril," he waits with his brethren for the Parousia, and, lo! "it is the Bridegroom coming where we never looked." And "Advent" declares again "We have become more humble than the rocks, More wakeful than the patient hills."

His exclamation in "The Candlemas Procession": "See how the One is multiplied among us hundreds!" echoes in poem after poem, and the first person singular is rarely encountered in his work. Even in his description of private prayer in "After the Night Office - Gethsemane Abbey," he speaks in the plural. Together and alone he and his brother monks speak to God in silent communion, and when

the lances of the morning  
Fire all their gold against the steeple and the water tower,

Returning to the windows of our deep abode of peace  
 Emerging at our conscious doors  
 We find our souls all soaked in grace like Gideon's fleece.

Just as there is no individualistic piety in Merton, so also there is no subjective sentimentality in either subject matter or style. The great fundamental truths of religion: the majesty, mercy and omnipresence of God; man's sin and materialistic forgetfulness of his Maker; the Mass; the sacraments; prayer; the passion and redemption; nature as a vehicle of grace — these are the sources of his inspiration. He treats them as vital realities, and his reaction is praise. He is not concerned with analysis of his own spiritual state, nor with petitions for personal spiritual enrichment. He writes verse which reflects his assimilation of a prayer-life which is communal in character.

There is at times an aloofness, a seeming absence of personal involvement with worlds either sacred or profane; when he is the singer at, but not of the Court; weirdly proficient on the strings with a thin tone high and full of joyance. At such times he is enraptured at the sheerness of the light embracing Godhead; sings for joy at its radiance, but is not burned by it.<sup>134</sup>

This is the bewildered but admiring comment of a secular reviewer who recognizes Merton's objectivity and detachment, but is at a loss to account for them. Perhaps the poet's own observation will clarify this matter. He speaks of special characteristics of the liturgy: "a music that is perfect in its dignity and ceremonies that are most meaningful by reason of their tremendous dramatic simplicity." Furthermore, he declares that the liturgy is a "school

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<sup>134</sup> J. T. Nicholl, Saturday Review of Literature, 29:44 M 23, '46.

of literary taste and a mine of marvellous subjects."<sup>135</sup> It seems logical to conclude, therefore, that the restraint of Merton's verse is a quality developed by contact with the esthetic values of the Church's prayer, values heightened by the emotional discipline necessary for communal worship.

Hildebrand speaks further of the spirit of discretio as a personality trait developed by the life of the liturgy. Under this coined term he treats gradations of perceptiveness and intuition which characterize a cultivated spirit. First among the facets of discretio Von Hildebrand numbers the sense of the rhythm of being:

That which unfolds itself in time implies an inner dramatic character, an inner organic rhythm of development. Everything requires its own time of inner ripening in order to be genuine and true. The sense of the law of the inner development of all things, which varies according to the sphere of being, is an element of that discretio, of that discrimination, which is a mark of personality.<sup>136</sup>

This appreciation of the sacramental character of time, sanctified by supernatural intention, made fruitful by penance and sacrifice, drawing souls to God and buying heaven for the Christian is dominant in Merton. He has a sensitivity for the need of preparation, of slow growth and unfolding. "What did you learn on the holy mountain?" he asks of the Precursor, and he speaks of Clairvaux as "astounded by the confidence of your expectancy." The brother-life of the abbey is "slow growing in the fruitful silence," and it is only "in the due day" after suffering in stability a training, growing, pruning process that the Holy Spirit will claim His vintage. In the interval:

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<sup>135</sup> Thomas Merton, "Poetry and the Contemplative Life," 98.

<sup>136</sup> Von Hildebrand, 141.

Oh, peal-your quiet unpretension and succession, time, your seasons  
 No-hurrying us to our sweet, certain, everlasting home;  
 And pour the news of these our slow progressions into the deep,  
 Down-falling with little echo into (peace) our garth-well.<sup>137</sup>

Another manifestation of this quality of discretio is a sense of the inner fullness and scope of certain moments. Probably the most telling proof that Merton possesses this penetration is the fact that he writes most frequently in the present tense. For this poet each passing moment bears its revelation of God and its weight or relevance for past and future generations. He is lost in admiration and wonder when he contemplates the moment that Mary hears her name "suddenly spoken like a meteor falling": he witnesses Peter who, after his denial:

flees into the freezing night.  
 And all the constellations vanish out of heaven with a glassy cry;  
 Cocks crow as sharp as steel in the terrible, clear east,

And the gates of night fall shut with the thunder of massbells;<sup>138</sup>

but the significance of the decisive moments of his own life are deeply realized, too:

Great Christ, my fingers touch Thy wheat  
 And hold Thee hidden in the compass of Thy paper sun.  
 There is no war will not obey this cup of Blood,  
 This wine in which I sink Thy words in the anonymous dawn!

Von Hildebrand signalizes as a further characteristic of discretio the realization of "the strata of depth at which one moves and should move."<sup>139</sup> A personality possessing this quality responds with proper depth to each chang-

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<sup>137</sup> Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 103.

<sup>138</sup> Merton, The Tears of the Blind Lions, 32.

<sup>139</sup> Von Hildebrand, 148.

ing situation of life; he is incapable of giving a shallow response to a genuine value for: "the level of expression and divulgence corresponds in its depths to the depth of the experience."<sup>140</sup> Merton has the "second sight" that is the prerogative of all poets: he discovers hidden beauty and inner relationships which he expresses in fresh, lucid images; but beyond this second dimension of poetic insight, Merton with other Catholic poets possesses a third: he sees things habitually from the supernatural point of view, and his poetic response never stops at a recognition of surface qualities. Thus, for him

the valleys shine with promises,  
And every burning morning is a prophecy of Christ  
Coming to raise and vindicate even our sorry flesh.<sup>141</sup>

Particularly in his nature poetry, as has been evidenced in the section on the sacramental universe, this insight is noticeable. Merton explicitly emphasizes his realization in the poem "Natural History" in which he states:<sup>142</sup> "Everything that moves is full of mystical theology." Finally the spirit of discretio presupposes an awareness of a hierarchy of values, "the gradations in relation with the kingdom of God." For Merton God is the Center of the universe; all creatures are on the periphery, and there is an evident difference in manner when he is concerned with the latter. There is the light lyricism with which he delights in the birds, "wild Cistercians who tune your praises to our Latin with your native liturgy. . ."

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>141</sup> Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 91.

<sup>142</sup> Merton, Figures for an Apocalypse, 77.

O charm the belfries of the budding wood.  
 Brown thrush and cardinal,  
 Blackbird and oriole,  
 Pouring upon the land your golden din.<sup>143</sup>

But in describing the presence of God engendered by the Church's prayer, the deep reverence of his response is most evident in these verses:

The Truth that transubstantiates the body's night  
 Has made our minds His temple-tent . . .  
 Sink from your shallows, soul, into eternity,  
 And slake your wonder at the deep-lake spring.  
 We touch the rays we cannot see,  
 We feel the light that seems to sing.<sup>144</sup>

Von Hildebrand traces to the formative power of the liturgy the development of the quality of discernment, pointing out the structure of the Mass, the Divine Office and the sacramental rites as embodying this sense of discretio. In all of the official ceremonial of the Church there is evident a gradation and rhythmic progress composed of preparation, culmination and decline. The prayers of contrition and desire at the foot of the altar are a preparation for the self-offering which precedes the renewal of the sacrifice of Calvary. All these actions ready the soul for the Communion banquet, and the Mass closes with petitions for the special graces of the feast in virtue of the sacramental contact. Merton has availed himself consistently of the riches of the liturgy. From the first days of his conversion it has been the staple of his spiritual nourishment, and his poetic talent would seem to have been enriched by it as well.

As has been expressed in the section on the Liturgical Year, the

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<sup>143</sup> Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 80.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 78.

mysteries of the recurring cycles are not mere commemorations of an historical event, but an actual "making present again" of the happening celebrated for the spiritual benefit of the participants. There is a vitality, an emphasis on "now," in the Church's official prayer; Hodie recurs constantly in the festal antiphons. This sense of imminence engenders in one who lives with the Church a quality which Von Hildebrand terms a spirit of continuity. Merton displays it constantly, not only in his choice of subjects but in his manner of developing them. In Figures for an Apocalypse,<sup>145</sup> his ardent cry to Christ

Come down, come down, Beloved,  
From the towers of Thy abode

expresses the intensity of his desire for the Parousia, the triumph of Christ's avenging justice in this age of secularism. He applies the Apocalyptic figures with terrible effectiveness to the contemporary scene; he is not concerned with the centuries that have elapsed since its composition by St. John in his Patmos exile, nor does he speak of a future consummation. The poem is in the present tense, and it is the salutary ruin of our world that he envisions.

In "The Trappist Cemetery - Gethsemane,"<sup>146</sup> the poet expresses his oneness with the "Cistercian fathers" that have preceded him. "Your work is not yet done," he tells them. In prayer and sacrifice he and his brothers are united with all who have gone before them. This is the doctrine of the Communion of Saints deeply realized and expressed in affectionate converse with

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<sup>145</sup> Merton, Figures for an Apocalypse, 13.

<sup>146</sup> Merton, A Man in the Divided Sea, 89.



his spiritual progenitors.

It is not only in his consciousness of a living spiritual heritage that Merton expresses his spirit of continuity: he sees a unity in his own life too. In "On the Anniversary of My Baptism,"<sup>147</sup> in lines already quoted, he thrills to the knowledge that he, as a person, has been eternally present to the mind of God Whose Providence ordained his spiritual regeneration.

"The Biography"<sup>148</sup> expresses yet another facet of this quality: Christ's oneness with His members until the pleroma of the Mystical Body is achieved at the end of time. The idea that Baptism has made him another Christ, a second humanity for the Work has taken a strong hold on this poet.

If on Your Cross Your life and death and mine are one,  
Love teaches me to read, in You, the rest of a new history.  
I trace my days back to another childhood,  
Exchanging, as I go,  
New York and Cuba for Your Galilee,  
And Cambridge for Your Nazareth,  
Until I come again to my beginning  
And find a manger, star and straw,  
A pair of animals, some simple men,  
And thus I learn that I was born  
Now not in France, but Bethlehem.

For Merton, then, steeped in the spirit of the liturgy, the finite barriers of time and space are overpassed, and every vicissitude of human existence is viewed in the light of the supernatural order.

Another quality manifest in Merton is a reflection of the classicism of the liturgy illustrated by his sense of spiritual balance. Preoccupation with one or another religious aspect is characteristic of a subjective ap-

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 73.

proach to spiritual truth, but this poet's work reflects the proportion and tempered selectivity of the Church's worship. This seems evident from the very fact that it is possible to treat his poetry under such a variety of subject divisions, all, however, unified by a single theme.

The Liturgy knows nothing of the . . . isolation of a religious attitude, justified and good in itself. Everything in the liturgy is put in its suitable place, everything is seen in the great connectedness of the classical relationship between God and men, everything appears in its organic linkage. Next to the *Domine Deus noster, quam admirabile est nomen Tuum* (Lord, our God, how admirable is Thy name) we find the *Domine, Domine, quis sustinebit* (Lord, who shall stand it): next to the *Rex tremendae majestatis* (King of dreadful majesty) the *Salva nos fons pietatis* (Fount of pity, save Thou me.)<sup>149</sup>

Since, therefore, attitudes fostered by liturgical prayer are discernible in the poetry of Thomas Merton, it would seem justifiable to conclude, particularly in view of his own previously quoted acknowledgment of debt, that his artistic formation has largely been influenced by his contact with the liturgy. This position is strengthened by the fact that there are discernible in Merton's work, attitudes fostered by liturgical prayer. His poetry has the objectivity of formal worship in that it is concerned with the great realities of religion and of life as these are presented in the majestic panorama unfolded by the Church in her ritual. God, man, sin, redemption, nature, grace — these are the subjects of his special interest.

The doctrine of the Mystical Body, a grasp of which is essential to the understanding of liturgical concepts, has given Merton a love of the Church as an organism. Implicit in all his work is the sense of communion with many brethren, and an understanding of the supernatural life which vivi-

fies and unites all the members of Christ. Individualism in spiritual matters is foreign to his outlook.

Flowing of necessity from the consciousness of divine life in the Communion of Saints is a spirit of timelessness, a vision of all things in the light of eternity. Always Merton looks to the Pleroma, the fullness of the Body of Christ, when all things shall at last be brought under His divine Headship:

How long we wait, with minds as quiet as time  
Like sentries on a tower.  
How long we watch, by night, like the astronomers?

From the measured development of liturgical ceremonies, their rhythmic progression, Merton has learned a sense of the rhythm of being. The changes of the seasons are for him symbolic of the soul's slow growth to maturity and the time of spiritual vintage.

It has been the burden of this chapter to demonstrate the extent of Thomas Merton's debt as a poet to the Church's liturgy as regards both content and manner of treatment, and to suggest that liturgical participation has been largely instrumental in giving form and direction to his natural skill.

Merton has pointed out that the liturgy is a "great sacramental built around the six sacraments which surround the greatest Sacrament Who is Christ Himself dwelling among us even unto the consummation of the world." Developing this idea further he adds:

Christ on the Cross is the fount of all art because He is the Word, the fount of all grace and wisdom. He is the center of everything, of the whole economy of the natural and supernatural orders. Everything points to this anointed King of Creation Who is the Splendor of the eternal

light and the mirror of the Godhead without stain.<sup>150</sup>

It is indeed Christ "firstborn of every creature" in Whom all things were created, Who is encountered in Merton's pages. "Through Him and with Him and in Him," is all glory given to the Father, and this poet sings of a life of praise wholly Christocentric in motive and object. For Thomas Merton the mystery of the Word made flesh in a Mystical Body assumed from twentieth century humanity; the vision of the Son of God rejoicing, laboring, suffering and dying in the persons of His members is a breath-taking concept and a fecund source of poetic inspiration.

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<sup>150</sup> Merton, "Poetry and the Contemplative Life," 98.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

In Thomas Merton's writings one contacts the mind of a modern turned monk. Merton is a thoroughly twentieth-century man. In the world he was one of a throng of searching young intellectuals satisfying themselves with the husks offered by a materialistic culture; he has found through his conversion to Catholicism, satisfaction of his spiritual longings, but he has not forgotten what manner of man he was, nor is he unmindful of those who are searching still. To reach them he has sent forth from Gethsemane's fruitful silence, book after book. It is in the slim volumes of his poetry that his message is communicated most directly, for his poems are nearly all records of his spiritual experiences. Moreover, his poetry is characterized by an objectivity and compression that are less evident in his prose reflections. That this is so is due largely to one fact: the liturgy of the Church with its majestic dignity, classic restraint and soul-satisfying beauty has been the principal source of Merton's inspiration. This thesis analyzes the extent of this dependence.

First, the earliest liturgical influences in Merton's life as a Catholic are evidenced, particularly the importance he himself attached to his recitation of the breviary while he was still in the world. It was after this that he began to write poetry. After his entrance into the monastery,

his most vivid and deeply-felt impressions concern the monastic ceremonial. The Sign of Jonas is essentially the diary of a fervent liturgist. The date always notes the feast, and frequently there is a comment on a text or phrase from the day's mystery. Even the moods of the writer are conditioned by the character of the season.

His poetry, too, signalizes the various feasts and seasons. Chapter Three of this thesis arranges this poetry under the heading of The Liturgical Year, treating in order the poems of the proper and the sanctoral cycles, as they occur on the Church's calendar. An explanation for each feast and season is given, and then Marton's poems are examined for their correspondence to the mind of the Church, as she represents each of her mysteries. The Church's instinct of reverencing the Saints as the models and heroes in the life of the spirit is most conspicuous in Merton, a fact the more surprising in view of the sophistication and cynicism of his earlier youth. He celebrates most often Mary, Queen of Heaven, St. John the Baptist and the great founders of his Order, but he has also a warm affection for the Little Flower to whom he promised: "I will be your monk."

The next subject division groups poems on the Mass, which reflect their author's great reverence in the Church's central act of worship and his consciousness of its redemptive significance for the modern world.

Surrounding the Mass like the jewels which form the setting of a precious gem, are the hours of the Divine Office, which extend its graces throughout the day and give a meditative preparation for the morrow's feast. St. Benedict called the Divine Office the Opus Dei, the work of God, and the

Trappist poet has assimilated well the attitude of his spiritual father. The office is work and penance, as well as prayer. To stand for hours chanting the psalms and responsories, sometimes in discomfort of heat or cold, annoyed by the brethren's eccentricities of rendition, is an exacting labor. Merton, however, fully realizes its immense value, both as a school of personal prayer and asceticism and as a means of taking part in the unceasing prayer of Christ for His wayward members. In his monastic isolation the world's needs are always present to the poet, and this social consciousness pervades his verses.

A favorite symbol of Christian artists is the representation of the cross from which flow seven streams of divine life. As fish in the stream, or thirsting harts along the banks, Christian souls drink of the waters of life. These seven streams signify the sacraments. Merton has poems only on Baptism and the Eucharist. The former he sees as death to the man of sin and a birth to the life of the spirit. Lightness of touch and intense personal joy characterize his reactions to the Blessed Sacrament. He is always aware, however, that Christ is the Head of many members with whom He is united by the reception of Communion. Merton is never an isolationist in his religious attitudes.

This realization of the supernatural unity among members of the Church militant, suffering and triumphant, and the social consequences of this bond is illustrated in a group of poems under the heading: The Mystical Body. Again and again Merton insists on the oneness of Christ and His members; on the fact that each Christian is another Christ, living, working, suffering, dying for the world's salvation. The poet never ceases to marvel at

beauty of this brotherhood. Here, too, he has discovered a more satisfying solution to world disunity and social injustices than he first thought to discover in Communism.

Finally, Merton is a nature poet. He loves the solitude of the forests surrounding Gethsemane, the panoramic view from a hilltop, starlit skies above him as he fire-watches from the monastery roof. The sure swoop of a predatory hawk arrests him, caterpillars on a wall, young bulls in spring, harvest time, sunset and snowfall -- all these figure in his verses. But it is a clean, new universe that moves this monk to song, a world sanctified by the advent of the God-Man Who restored its dignity by His coming. Nature's loveliness lifts the poet's soul to God and reminds him of the freshness of perpetual spring which awaits the faithful Christian in Heaven.

These, then, are the subjects treated in the liturgical poems of Thomas Merton. In the manner of handling his themes, too, as is shown in Chapter Four, the Trappist exemplifies the formative influence of the liturgy. His work is characterized by a classical objectivity and a sense of social solidarity. He realizes the sacramental character of time, the fullness of certain moments above others, the graduated response to a hierarchy of values, which Von Hildebrand refers to as a sense of discretio. Merton grasps reality as a whole; he does not fasten on one aspect of the Christian mystery to the exclusion of others; on the contrary, a spirit of continuity unifies his outlook.

It may be well at the conclusion of this thesis to note some recent reactions to Merton. In Atlantic Monthly for January, 1953, appears "the



only full-length appraisal of Thomas Merton that has so far been printed,"<sup>151</sup> the work of Aelred Graham, Prior of Portsmouth Priory in Rhode Island. This article is popular in tone, and in it Merton is criticized on several counts, among them: "an apocalyptic imagination," and impatience with fine, philosophical distinctions: "The force of what he has to say would undoubtedly be weakened by the subtleties of balance and proportion." He is, according to Dom Aelred, "a propagandist of mysticism for the masses," and the Benedictine critic doubts whether "his well-intentioned simplifications can serve any lasting purpose." Regarding Merton's poetry, the article is kinder:

Many of his verses have the authentic ring of poetry . . . Merton is happier at poetry than with the disciplined exposition of divinity, 'the dry verbiage of theologians!' The freer medium provides scope for his rich, creative imagination; perhaps also for that 'sense of energy and resolve,' still retained, 'that made me think everything was more interesting than it was.' Merton finds it easier to embody the orthodoxy of Catholicism in the products of his own imagination than to study his religion at its sources.

The comment of Reverend Augustine Klaas, S. J., regarding this article follows:

Some of Benedictine Aelred Graham's strictures on Thomas Merton are justified. Others are quite dubious, highly subjective, and just a bit blatant. One is surely wrong: Merton's neglect of Holy Scripture. I venture to say that a careful, observant reader will find as much, if not more Bible in Merton's than in Graham's spiritual books.<sup>152</sup>

Another Jesuit, Joseph Landy, S. J., comes to Merton's defence in pointing out what this writer feels is the most satisfying answer to the

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<sup>151</sup> Dom Aelred Graham, O.S.B., "Thomas Merton, Modern Man in Reverse," The Atlantic Monthly, January, 1953, 70.

<sup>152</sup> Augustine Klaas, S.J., Catholic Review Service, No. 8, February 23, 1953, 33.

theologians who challenge Merton for his popularizations and inexactitude:

That message may at times have seemed limited, a shade or two off balance—particularly to those who have read it in only one book or a few poems. But this is to be expected in any spiritual writer or preacher who is not interested in propagating or erecting a 'system.' John the Baptist, after all, was somewhat to the 'left of center,' and we all know how highly Christ rated his words. How many of the great spiritual writers have embodied the architectonic wholeness of a Summa Theologica in their works? Certainly not Augustine nor A Kempis nor Pascal. The Christianity of which they wrote had been ground through the mill of personal experience, and it had a personal 'slant.' Of course, that is why they wrote literature. And that is why they are read.<sup>153</sup>

Merton is a popular writer, a writer with a personal message; he does not aim at producing theological treatises. He does, however, claim to some attempt at literary craftsmanship in his poetry. He exclaims disconsolately over his self-recognized failures in artistry. Reviews previously cited are evidence that he has succeeded in his efforts to produce acceptable verse to the extent that critics take his work seriously.

This thesis has been concerned with Thomas Merton as a poet. It has sought to prove that the principal source of inspiration for his verse, as well as a formative factor which he himself credits, has been the liturgy of the Church: that magnificent synthesis of Scripture and Tradition in which the Mystical Christ represents the mysteries of its Head and Spouse for the spiritual life and strength of its members.

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<sup>153</sup> Joseph Landy, S. J., "The Meaning of Thomas Merton," America, February 21, 1953, 569.

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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis submitted by Sister Mary Paul  
Riilly, O.S.B. has been read and approved by three  
members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the  
director of the thesis and the signature which  
appears below verifies the fact that any necessary  
changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis  
is now given final approval with reference to con-  
tent, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial  
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